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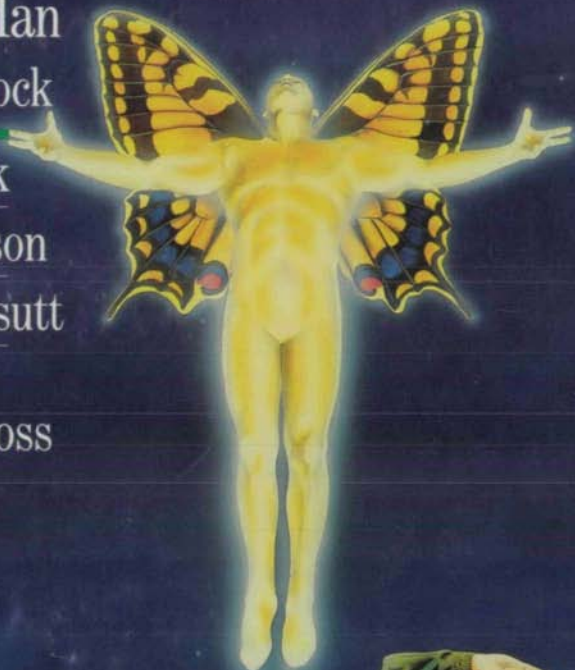
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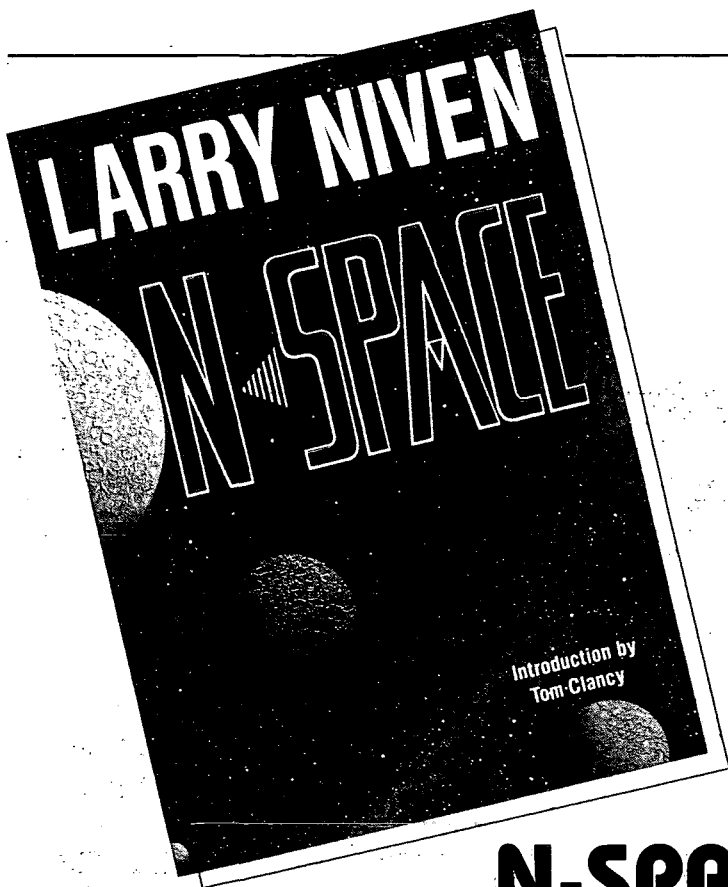
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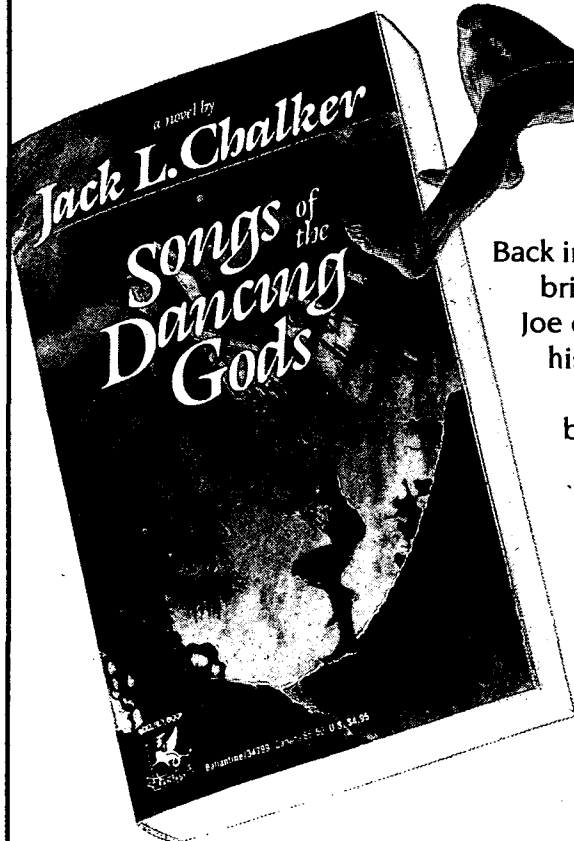
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Here is some first-rate science fiction from Ronald Anthony Cross ("Down the Hatch," June 1990) about a beautiful nun and her encounters with the enigmatic aliens known as the Strebe and their even more mysterious gods, the Teelee.

All the Way to Teelee Town

By Ronald Anthony Cross

Prologue

WHEN SISTER MARY was first set down at Earth Base on the planet Anubis, the first thing she did was rush to the wall of windows overlooking the slums of the primitive city of the Strebe and exclaim, "Work," shaking her head, but smiling faintly.

Jim Rodricks, who was in charge of the small base, which consisted mostly of a computer-communications center and supply-drop setup, a small staff, and a couple of resident anthropologists, was a bit taken aback by this reaction, as he had been in the act of delivering his "Welcome to Anubis" speech: a concise little number with a touch of humor added to spice up the important but dull information newly arrived personnel would need to know. He had been caught with his mouth open. And, after all, he was in charge here. But no one was in charge of Sister Mary, he intuited (correctly), and regained his composure. Started over.

"You can always check out one of the little skimmers, if someone else hasn't beaten you to it. Easy to get lost here. Always better to take a skimmer. And remember to carry your transceiver. You can clip it on your belt," he said, immediately feeling foolish.

Sister Mary, who was wearing a traditional nun's habit, smiled.

"No belt," she said. "I could clip it on my rosary."

And of course, Rodricks knew from this that she would not be carrying a transceiver — probably wouldn't use one of the skimmers, either.

As if in answer to this, she said: "The only way to get to know people is to walk among them."

But the best way to know the Strebe, Jim Rodricks thought, looking out the window, was to fly above them. What we have here is trouble. One more thing for me to worry about.

As if reading his mind yet again, Sister Mary smiled and said: "Not to worry, Mr. Rodricks; they sent me out here so that I could get into trouble without being a nuisance to anyone. You know it. I know it. I am here to work. To do the work of the Lord, if I may be so bold."

Oh, you may, you may, Jim Rodricks thought. When she smiled, he had realized for the first time that she was a beautiful woman, delicate, strong, patrician even. Fiery. Just what we need. Trouble upon trouble.

"So," she continued, "you don't come between me and my work, and I won't come between you and your computer."

First off, right after he had introduced himself, Jim had introduced his computer. "Big Ben's in there," he had said, "pretty much the main reason for the base here," etc., etc. He had given himself away with that, he realized; he should be more careful. Not for the first time, he wished that he had been more the adventurous type. Right now he'd be on one of those major expeditions out there exploring the planet instead of stuck here at the communications base, where nothing ever happened. Except trouble. And only petty trouble, at that.

"Who are you?" Sister Mary said to the Strebe who was carrying in the heavy carton of supplies (heavy for a human, not heavy for a Strebe).

"Where do I put this?" the Strebe said. Jim thought, What is his name? Which one is he? You could hardly tell one Strebe from the next. But this one was a little different somehow. Little brighter. Grebe? Grebe the Strebe? Jim muffled a laugh and gestured toward a corner of the room.

"Who are you?" Sister Mary said again, undaunted; and Jim noticed that

she was speaking in the Strebe dialect. Perfectly. Far better than he could manage. She must have been studying on the ship, he thought. Studying hard. *Work*, as she put it. But then again, if you were a nun. . . .

"Grib," the Strebe said, and then added slyly: "I'm Grib, you Sister Mary."

"How do you know my name, Grib?"

"There was much talk about you, Sister Mary," Grib said. "Before you come here."

Sister Mary smiled. "I'll bet there was."

Sister Mary turned back to Jim Rodricks and said, as if speaking to a servant, "I'll need Grib to carry my medical gear and act as a go-between with the locals. I won't need much else, but I'll let you know if I do. Meanwhile, I'll be out of your hair."

Jim started to protest, then thought, Isn't getting Sister Mary out of my hair worth losing Grib? I can always get another Strebe. He decided to acquiesce, but she had already turned away from him and gone on to something else, robbing him of even this dignity.

"Grib, would you open that carton over there? I'll show you how to pack our medical bags. See this? This is our analyzer; it goes in here like this."

In fact, Jim Rodrick realized, it was not necessary for him to do or say a goddamn thing. The woman had dismissed him. Even the Strebe had dismissed him. Was over there taking orders from Sister Mary like she was the queen of the Strebe, if there was such a thing. Yes, Sister Mary. No, Sister Mary. Getting ready for the great adventure. Which, as Sister Mary had so exuberantly pointed out first thing, would be work, all right. Drudgery. Sheer, unbelievable drudgery.

But he could not help but be fascinated by her. Look at her, he thought. Two minutes on base, and she insults the chief communications officer, takes over his number one gofer, and heads off into the wilderness of Strebe City — What do they call this dump? Darkshade. Wonder what she did to get booted out here? That made him smile. Followed by the thought, Wonder what I did to get booted out here? That did not make him smile. Not at all.

* * *

I

THE FIRST time Sister Mary heard mention of the Teelee, she had thought it was a legend. They had been standing in the middle of the dirt road, surrounded by the ramshackle wooden constructions that formed the grungy town of Darkshade, when Grib waved his hand to take in the whole affair and said: "Ugly.

"We call 'Darkshade' because is best way of seeing town. In no light."

"I'll bet some of your towns are lovely, though," Sister Mary said.

"How much?"

Sister Mary looked puzzled. "How much lovely?"

"How much bet?"

Sister Mary examined his features closely for some sign of how to take the statement. Was he putting her on? But as usual, not only with Grib, but with all the Strebe she had dealt with so far, there was absolutely no expression there: not the slightest hint that he might be indulging in humor.

"I didn't really mean that I wanted to bet something, Grib."

"Then why you say so?"

"I don't know; it's just the way I speak. It's called 'figuratively speaking.'" (Here she inserted the English word "figuratively" into the Strebe dialogue — there was no word in Grib's language to substitute for it.)

"Good thing," Grib said. "You lose."

"Lose what?"

"What you figuratively bet. That thing you lose. All places Strebe build ugly. Very ugly." He turned around completely in a circle, as if carefully examining Darkshade.

"Very, very ugly," he concluded.

"We no Teelee," he added.

"What are Teelee?" Sister Mary asked halfheartedly.

"Teelee are the glorious shining ones who live in Bliss City."

That caught her interest.

"Are the Teelee gods, Grib?"

Grib looked angry; at least he looked that way to Sister Mary. It was the only expression she had ever seen him use, and sparingly, at that.

He was a large, squat, hairy creature, definitely humanoid, but with far more muscle mass than any human. Yet he was not particularly large for the Strebe.

Sister Mary could not help but think of him as gorilla-like, though she was ashamed to catch herself doing it. Often.

"No, Teelee not gods. Teelee real."

After a pause, he said slyly: "When you talk God, Sister Mary, you talk figuratively?"

Now it was Sister Mary's turn to express anger. It was the first time Grib had seen it, but he had no difficulty interpreting it. It was accompanied by intricate body language: double fists, rigid posture, as if she were going to actually physically attack Grib. Humans were such puny little creatures; but then, so were Teelee; you could never tell: Grib backed up a step.

"God is real," Sister Mary said in a crisp tone. "Most real of all. Ultimate reality."

"God make world and humans and Strebe?" he asked innocently.

"Yes."

"Please ask him to make this city clean and pretty. Make everyone who sick feel good. Give everyone food."

Sister Mary couldn't think quickly enough what to say.

"God makes all those miracles it says in book you read to us, but now he won't do any more?" Grib asked. "Maybe God dead."

Sister Mary couldn't help but smile at that. Even though she still felt angry.

Maybe He is dead, or maybe He used to be transcendent but now is in the process of becoming immanent, she said, but only to herself, not wanting to attempt explaining her favorite theory to Grib. But do I really believe that? she worried.

"Well, the Teelee not dead. So the Teelee not God. Teelee real. Too real. Too bad."

"Why, Grib?" They were on the move again. Searching out a particular box carton of rooms where new disease had supposedly broken out among the Strebe: Grib was carrying Sister Mary's satchel of doctor's tools.

"Teelee can be dangerous."

"What are the Teelee like, Grib? What can they do?"

"Teelee teach the Strebe to speak to each other. That why Strebe speak so good."

I wondered, Sister Mary thought, smiling. "Why did they do that, Grib?"

Grib shook his massive head. "Must have wanted something. Only Teelee know what."

"What else can the Teelee do, Grib?"

Grib stopped and pointed at a dilapidated five-story building made entirely, of course, out of rotting, discolored wood.

"Teelee can jump over building," he said.

"At a single bound?" Sister Mary could not stop herself from asking.

Grib said: "Only one bound is jump over. Two bounds is jump on and jump off."

"Yes, that's true, Grib," Sister Mary said, thinking to herself that clearly the idea of the Teelee represented the first primitive stirrings of religious awe in the consciousness of the Strebe: first superstition, which later perhaps would ripen into questions about the nature of life and the source of it. "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower." But at this point in their development, the Strebe seemed to show no interest whatever in that sort of question: they were an amazingly literal-minded race, Grib being by far the most inquisitive representative of Strebe culture that Sister Mary had encountered.

Plus, he was always such a great help to her on her medical rounds, acting primarily as a much-needed go-between for Sister Mary and the naturally distrustful Strebe in Darkshade. Remembering this, Sister Mary softened somewhat toward him, and set aside her anger. Besides, they had work to do. Important work. Lots and lots of it.

But today, as almost always, what they had rushed so dramatically to confront had turned out to be a routine affair. Routine but fulfilling. Several families of Strebe all packed together on one floor of one of those primitive, run-down apartment buildings, all suffering from some form of simple virus or other, was what they found. With Grib using his powers of persuasion, it had taken only an hour or so to convince one of them to let Sister Mary take a blood sample. The blood sample was then fed to the little analyzer Sister Mary carried around with her (or rather, had Grib carry for her). The machine did not bother to inform Sister Mary of the results of its analysis — she had no need to know — it only told her which medicine to administer. And of course she would add to that an immune booster and multivitamin dose. But first another half hour had to be spent with Grib persuading the sick but stubborn Strebe to let Sister Mary use the shot dispenser on one of them. Finally the big male who had first

submitted to a blood sample was convinced to further his display of bravery by allowing himself to be inoculated as an example. An hour or so later, and Grib was leading Sister Mary back to the Earth Base, where the little analyzer would feed all of its info to its big brother, affectionately called "Big Ben" by everyone at the base. Nothing special about that trip. The only reason Sister Mary ever thought of it later on was because it was the first time she had heard of the Teelee. Quaint legend. There's hope for them yet, she had thought.

II

BUT THE first time she saw a Teelee, that was certainly no routine excursion to cure a few colds. That was the real thing. Later she was to wonder if it had just been coincidence or if it had been planned that way. By the Teelee. By the time it was all over and she was looking back on it, trying to make sense of it, she had realized that one could not rule out anything with the Teelee. One could not comprehend the Teelee. Either what they could do, or why they would do it.

It was raining. The dirt road they called a street here was a river of mud. The old man lay in it, too covered with mud for her to make out his features, shivering, groaning. Sister Mary was staring with horror at the little screen on her analyzer. The words "Don't know" were flashing on the screen.

"Don't know?" Sister Mary said out loud to herself in English.

Grib, who was kneeling beside her, could not understand the words, but he had grown to know Sister Mary well enough by now so that he could perceive her concern. He reached out and touched her shoulder. "What machine say?" Grib asked her. "You tell me, please."

"The analyzer is unable to prescribe from the blood sample. It apparently can't understand what's wrong with this poor man. Still, if we can get it back to base, feed the info to Big Ben, I'm sure then we should be able to. . . . Listen, Grib, I'll stay here with the old man. I'll give him a standard series of shots. You go for help. We'll get him back to base, then we can. . . ." Her voice died out. Grib was shaking his head.

"No, Sister Mary, I won't leave you alone here. Not safe. I stay."

Sister Mary stared into his eyes — calm, quiet, impassive, stubborn, or

just plain stupid? Ashamed of her thoughts, yet unable to banish them, she looked about her for the first time at the crowd of Strebe moving inexorably through the rain. Big, slow-moving, apparently unconcerned whether they were wet or cold, the traffic was as busy as if the sun were shining. Several of them were sneezing, sniffing, but apparently oblivious to their condition. Were they really that stupid? God forgive me.

"Please — Grib, you've got to go for help. I don't know what's wrong with the old man; I don't know what to do."

Grib shook his head. "I won't leave you."

The old Strebe moaned and thrashed. He was obviously burning up with fever. Dying.

"Grib, you've got to. Don't you understand? The old man will die if you don't. Don't you care? What's the matter with you? What's the matter with all of you?" Astonishingly, against her will, Sister Mary was starting to cry.

Grib shrugged (a gesture he had learned from Sister Mary). "He is only Strebe," he said. "I won't leave you here."

Now tears were streaming down Sister Mary's cheeks, but who could tell in the rain? I should have stayed on Earth, she thought. Oh, forgive me, God, forgive me.

Not knowing what to do, she did nothing. The three of them just phased out for a while, Sister Mary and Grib squatting there in the mud, in the rain, while, unconcerned, the Strebe went about their business.

Gradually, Sister Mary became aware that something strange was happening. The Strebe were no longer swarming about them: they were all down on their knees.

"Hide your face," Grib said. "Teelee coming."

And sure enough, Sister Mary saw something in the distance, moving down the road in her direction, something that was glowing in the rain. Almost forgetting to breathe or blink her eyes, she monitored its approach while Grib and the rest of the Strebe groveled in the mud, eyes hidden in their huge, hairy hands.

As the figure neared her, she was able to make out that it was definitely humanoid, like the Strebe, only much smaller, smaller than Sister Mary, even. She could not tell if it was male or female, or discern its features. Beneath the glow, its face seemed indistinct, unformed; the features were shifting, moving constantly.

"Please help me," she was surprised to hear herself say. "Are you Teelee?"

Can you help me? Do you speak the language of the Strebe?"

The creature seemed to be studying her, though she could not be sure.

"This form is Teelee," it said in a small, high, delicate voice, like the voice of a small child, "but why should Teelee help?"

It took a moment for Sister Mary to realize that it was speaking to her in English.

"My God," she said, "you speak English."

"Yes, understanding is total here," it said in its sweet voice. "The being you think of as you uses a primitive spoken form of communication like Strebe talk. Everything in your mind is totally understood here. Simply understood. You are to Teelee, like — what? . . . Cockroach, understand? Easy for Teelee to communicate, but not necessary."

"Then why are you doing it?" Sister Mary sobbed, surprised to find that she was either still crying or had started again.

"Whim," the Teelee said.

"Then help me out of whim. Tell me what to do, if you're so damn omniscient," she was shocked to hear herself say.

"Do nothing," the Teelee said. "He has the plague. Do you understand? Like what in your mind is thought of as plague. Unstoppable wave of disease, suffering, and death."

Sister Mary was shaking now, and not from the cold. "Unstoppable for you? No, I think not."

"Why should Teelee stop plague? Plague is good for the Strebe. Too many Strebe now."

"For God's sake, help us. Tell us what to do."

The Teelee said nothing.

"At least help me, can't you? I don't know what to do. I can't leave the old man; Grib won't go for help. Can't you help me somehow? Do something? Anything?"

Suddenly the body of the sick Strebe flew up off the ground, spun around in the air, and fell back down, where it convulsed violently in the mud. All this was accompanied by a loud sizzling noise. He twitched all over and then lay still: the unmistakable stillness of death.

"Oh — my — God," Sister Mary said. "You've killed him."

"He's only Strebe," the Teelee said, and moved on past her and down the street, and out of sight.

"Get up. Grib, get up. Damn it, stop groveling in the mud. He's gone."

He killed the old man." Grib cautiously removed his hands from his eyes.

"You asked Teelee to help you," he reminded her.

Then, of course, Sister Mary had prayed for the old man. Prayed for the Strebe. Prayed that it wasn't the truth, that there wouldn't be a plague. But, as Grib pointed out to her, her prayers, as usual, were not being answered.

"No one there?" Grib asked her innocently.

III

BY THE third week, half of Darkshade was sick, deathly sick. No one yet had lived through it. The Strebe, naturally, made no move to better their situation. Those who hadn't yet caught the disease spent all their spare time calmly weaving great colorful baskets out of straw. "Coffins," Grib had pointed out, to her horror. It turned out that all the bodies were put in these straw sarcophagi, and then the baskets were woven shut and tossed on carts and indiscriminately dumped outside of town. First the Strebe made one for him- or herself, then went to work on baskets for the bodies of friends or relatives: it was a veritable festival of death.

What shocked Sister Mary most of all was not so much Grib's callous attitude toward the rest of the Strebe, as it was Grib's attitude toward Grib: he apparently did not even care the least little bit whether he caught the plague or not. He only shook his head at Sister Mary's worry and said: "We all only Strebe. All but you, Sister Mary." And he gently touched her cheek with his great hand.

More than anything, this broke her heart.

"No, no," she said, "you're special. Everybody's special."

"Then why plague?" Grib said, in what finally Sister Mary had come to recognize as his mischievous tone of voice.

IV

THE IDEA came to her in a dream. Sister Mary was back home on Earth in this dream. She must have been back home, mustn't she? Because there was Father Brenner sitting across from her at his big desk. The little fart always sat you in that tiny wooden chair while he sat back of that huge oak desk in that throne, looking down

on you — Forgive me. Oh, forgive me for thinking like that.

"Well, Sister Mary, here we are again. Right back where we started from. How could you do this to me? To Sister Clara? To the Church? Do you think the Church benefits by all this. . . ."

So she must be back on Earth, but out the window (had that big expanse of window been there before?) — out the window was Darkshade, the city of the Strebe.

"Sister Clara gave you several responsibilities. You had your duties. You swore to be obedient, Sister Mary, but you —"

"I am obedient first of all to God," Sister Mary interjected.

"God? Was it God Himself who told you to organize the prostitutes into a union instead of clean up the rectory kitchen? Do you speak personally to God now? How dare you? It's the Church who decides the will of God, and not you, Sister Mary. Why, you're not even sure you believe in God, are you?"

Sister Mary jumped up out of her chair. "That's not true. That's not true at all. Anyway, I believe in those prostitutes. I believe there's something of God in those prostitutes."

"Bullshit," Father Brenner said, quite uncharacteristically. "You believe in nothing, Sister Mary. Zero. Zip. That's the real so-help-me-God truth of the matter. You know it. I know it."

"No. No," Sister Mary cried out. "That's not true. I believe in love . . . I love . . . I love. . . ."

"You love no one," Father Brenner said, "which is why you're always so fired up about work, and helping people. Because you really don't love anyone, you don't know how, and you're ashamed of that, you're trying to make up for it."

"No, no," Sister Mary was crying out in her dream, and even moaning in her sleep.

Suddenly Father Brenner was out of his seat and grabbing her by the shoulders (Father Brenner?) with a grip like a pair of steel pliers, and dragging her sobbing over to the window.

"There, see that? That's what you believe in. The Teelee, not God. Cheap miracles, that's what you want, not love. Want to know about God? Try asking the Teelee, not the Church. Want to cure all the problems of the world? Ask the Teelee, not God. They'll solve them for you, one way or another. You may not like the results — But, hey, nobody's perfect. Or are they?"

Now she could see the Teelee floating above Darkshade, zooming toward the window, glowing, arms stretched wide in a position suggesting embrace (or crucifixion).

"Why don't you get down on your knees with the rest of the poor savage Strebes and worship the goddamned trickster Teelee?"

"Wait a minute, Father Brenner, what are you doing here on Anubis? You're not supposed to be here; you're back on Earth. This is a dream. And you can't hurt me in a dream, because *nothing's* real in a dream, not even God."

"Nothing but the Teelee," he said, smiling wickedly.

And suddenly the Teelee was in the room, still moving toward them, still glowing.

"Come to me, my child," the Teelee said to Sister Mary in its clear, sweet voice, "for you have sinned."

Sister Mary woke up, covered with sweat. Well, Father Brenner, she thought, in a way you're right. For the first time in your life, you little fart, you're right about something. The Teelee were the ones to ask, all right. The Teelee had the power.

What had Grib said about them? What was it . . . ? Shining ones in a golden city or floating city or something like that? Why hadn't she paid more attention? Why hadn't it dawned on her sooner?

She got up, showered, dressed quickly, and went outside, nodding briskly to Jim, who was already up and drinking coffee. The man looked haggard, resentful even: probably just because she had commandeered his entire staff of Strebe to build and manage the compound built onto the base, Sister Mary figured.

All you had to do was go out the door, and there it was: rows and rows of cots filled with dying Strebe groaning and sweating, crying out and stinking — all under a picturesque ramshackle wooden roof. Earth Base — meet Darkshade.

"What's the rush? Sit down, have a cup of my dynamite coffee," Rodricks said in a bitter tone of voice. There was also a slur in it. Now Sister Mary noticed the open bottle of brandy on the table.

"Isn't it too early in the morning for that?" Sister Mary said, trying to keep her voice even, wanting to get out the door, but not wanting to just ignore the man.

"No no no," he said: "It's not too early, and it's not too late. The

time is now. Before the fucking plague gets me. Oops — sorry, Sister."

"There's no reason to believe the plague can cross over from the Strebe to humans," Sister Mary said, still edging toward the door. "The plague's not going to get you."

"Oh, but it's already got me," he said sadly, pouring more brandy into his coffee cup. "Ever try brandied coffee without the coffee? It's great. It's my own invention, and it's just great. I do believe that when I'm dead and gone, Sister Mary, I will be remembered for it, and cherished in the hearts of the people. Jesus Christ, I can't even say 'people.' Where was I? What was I. . . . Oh yeah, the plague's already got me. The plague and you, Sister Mary. I haven't got a staff anymore. By the way, Preston's expedition is heading back here, but they won't get here till it's all over and all of us are dead and gone, except for in the memory of people everywhere, which is where I'll be. For this drink I invented." He poured more in his cup. Then he said in a soberer tone of voice: "The plague's already got me. I'm over the edge. I'm scared, I'm alone, and I don't believe in anything at all, and I've been slowly creeping up on the edge, out here, for a long, long time. But now I'm over it. I don't know how to get back."

"Sorry," Sister Mary said, "but I've got work to do."

"Why? Tell me why? What's the point of it all? None of it makes any difference — can't you see that? The Strebe are going to die, either in that damn stockade you got my staff running, or out there in the city. What's the difference? And the thing about it is that . . . the plague is just to remind us, is a microcosm for us all to understand, that we're all going to die, you see? You, me, all of us. None of it makes even a little tiny bitty witty difference — like that," he said, showing her with his thumb and forefinger about an inch of space. "No, no, like that." Reducing it to half an inch.

"You are wrong," Sister Mary said. "It all matters. I don't know how to convince you. But you are wrong."

"Come on, sit down, have a drink. Try out my new invention."

"I'm sorry," Sister Mary said, "but I haven't got time for this. Work to do." She headed out the door.

"Hey, bet you forgot your morning prayer; aren't you supposed to do an hour of morning prayer or something?"

"Work is prayer," Sister Mary said, but more to herself than to Rodricks, as she was already through the door and outside in the newly built compound.

Today she headed straight for the cot where Grib slept, tossing out a few hellos and, "Great job you're doing," to the staff members, but not pausing for their answers.

"What?" Grib grumbled, sitting up, still half-asleep.

"Grib, do you know where the Teelee live?"

Grib nodded: "Teelee live in City of Sizzling Bliss," he said.

"Do you know where it is? Don't you see, Grib? You must take me there. Is it far? Don't you see that the Teelee are the only ones who can do anything? Who have the power? You have to take me there. Please, Grib, I'm begging you."

It seemed to Sister Mary that Grib looked truly puzzled. (Was she finally learning to understand his expressions? Was this what she used to think of as a sort of frown?)

"Let me sleep a little more, Sister Mary. Teelee don't care about Strebe," he said.

"But we've got to try. Don't you see that it's the only chance we have to save your people? Is it terribly far from here? Oh God, let it be near."

"At last God answers your prayer, Sister Mary. It is near. But . . . I will not take you."

"Grib, what do you mean? You've got to take me."

"Teelee can be dangerous," he said. "Don't you remember, Sister Mary? Teelee can kill."

"Damn it, Grib," Sister Mary said, adopting her furious posture. "I know they can be dangerous. But they're our only chance. We've got to try. We've got to."

Grib shook his head.

Suddenly Sister Mary surged out of control and lashed out with, "You're always going on about how inferior and stupid you all are. Damn it, if that's true, then how dare you make decisions for me? Just you do what I tell you to do, damn it."

Grib was silent. And this time, Sister Mary could not read his expression. Was he hurt? Angry? Or just plain sleepy?

"You're right, Sister Mary," he said. "I will do whatever you tell me. This is what Strebe good for. I will take you tonight. It is not very far at all. Over there." He waved across town. "In the forest, very near our graveyard."

Sister Mary shuddered to think of all those straw baskets tossed in a huge clearing, euphemistically referred to as a graveyard.

"Why tonight?" she said. "Why not now?"

Grib shrugged. "Easy to find at night."

"Why?"

"Because," he said, "it glows in dark." And then, noticing that Sister Mary was still registering dissatisfaction, he added: "Besides, don't you want time to pray for forgiveness for swearing, Sister Mary? You getting to where you swear more than you pray. So go away for a while. You pray. I sleep. Later we go."

That night, just as the sky was darkening, Grib led Sister Mary from the edge of town, carefully around the upwind side of the graveyard clearing, and into the woods. Sister Mary thought, as she followed him into the trees, that his slow, shambling gait expressed reluctance, but perhaps it was uncertainty: it seemed to her unlikely that he knew the way.

Shortly she signaled to him to stop, surprised to find herself whispering, as she questioned him again.

"Wherever you enter the woods, you will find it," was the answer he gave her.

They walked on silently, deeper into the gathering darkness. The twisted trees and bushes closing in on them seemed more and more like shadowy creatures, goblins, trolls, so that as they moved on, the journey more and more resembled a dream. The confusing mixture of pungent forest odors, perfume and decay, which at first seemed charming and pure to her, had by now assumed a vague hint of danger; everything grows, dies, decays, it suggested, everything and everyone.

Sister Mary was now certain that they were lost. How could she have let Grib lead her into this? Again she signaled for him to stop, and this time, in a low whisper, informed him of her decision to turn back.

"But Sister Mary," he said, "have you not noticed it growing brighter? We are near the Teelee."

Now that he mentioned it, there did seem to be more light, but as far as Sister Mary could tell, there was no source of it. It simply seemed as if the night had brightened up a bit.

They started to walk again, and unmistakably, as they moved on, the sky grew brighter and brighter, until it was as bright as broad daylight, and then brighter still. It was as though the light were attempting to match the heady forest odors and thus assail the eyes as well as the nose.

Sister Mary had never seen so clearly: every leaf on every tree was etched and outlined now, and this was accompanied by a sizzling noise that grew louder and louder, as if you could hear the brightness falling from the air and being born again.

Suddenly Grib collapsed and covered his eyes. "I will go no farther," he said.

"How can I find my way?" Sister Mary murmured. But Grib did not bother to answer. There was no need to answer. Surprising herself, she went on. And on.

Now the light had grown too bright to be broken up into color. Everything was a blazing, scintillating silver.

And now the trees and shrubbery seemed to dissolve in the sea of light. It's too bright to see, Sister Mary realized. All that I can perceive is an ocean of light. I wonder if I'll go blind?

But she went on. And to her amazement, she discovered that the forest was not just invisible — it was gone.

And now the ocean of light began to break up and form the world again, only this time, Sister Mary had the sensation that it wasn't merely reflecting from objects but that this light was the ground manifesting the city, the Teelee, and even herself now. I've been reborn of the light, Sister Mary thought, wondering if this was blasphemy or not.

She had no way to describe the city of the Teelee, and thus no way to even remember what she saw. Sight was not the way to comprehend it, she realized, and what's more, the other senses were also quite useless here. One needed to sort of intuit the city. And she had these impressions of it:

The city of the Teelee was always moving, shifting, and changing. The city was somehow part of the Teelee and not a separate structure built by them. This manifestation that she thought of as the city was what the Teelee were doing, what they meant, what they were. She had sensations of absolute complexity. Absolute simplicity. Of absolute immensity. But of course, not physical size. The city of the Teelee did not take place in space. The city of the Teelee, Sister Mary intuited, was the essence of Creation, the meaning of the universe. But of course she could not understand it. But the thing was that she almost *could* understand it. And she had the feeling that any moment, everything would come clear to her, and she knew that if that happened, she would no longer be Sister Mary but she would be Teelee. "Everything Teelee," she mumbled to herself. "I can't stand this."

She was aware of bright beings aware of her being aware of them. She did not have to speak or hear them speak to understand what they were telling her. "Go away, tainted being" or "impure creature"; it would be something like that if it were put into words.

I can connect with the Teelee, read their minds, she thought. Why, I can do that with anyone, anywhere. It's all so simple, I . . ."

"Go away."

"No, wait," she said-thought to them. "I can't stand this. Why am I here? What was it? Something terrible. The plague. Yes, that was it. You must help the Strebe. I've come here to beg you. You must. . . ."

"Very well, if you won't go away. . . ."

At once she was back standing in the forest. The memory of the city of the Teelee was a bright bubble falling into an immense ocean of darkness. Everything she had grasped or known or discovered or almost discovered or. . . The bubble popped. Gone.

"Grib," she called out.

Grib answered. Sister Mary could hear him moving in the brush. She called out to him again, and soon he was by her side.

He pointed up in the sky: a bright light seemed to be moving away from them.

"Teelee move their city away from you, Sister Mary. Teelee gone."

The light went out.

"Don't cry, Sister Mary," Grib said. And Sister Mary realized that she was crying once again.

"I can't remember," she said.

V

THE PLAGUE raged among the Strebe, feeding off them, but gutting its appetite for torture first. There wasn't much anybody could do, but Sister Mary did what she could.

Strangely enough, Rodricks seemed to have pulled out of his slump, and nowadays spent much of his time helping the rest of them in the compound. I guess he was unable to get a patent on his invention, Sister Mary thought wickedly, not forgetting to add a, "God forgive me," afterward.

Sister Mary checked in with the staff every morning, but really, they

were all doing everything they could, and now that she had got them started, they were rolling along on their own. Her place was out there. Hers and Grib's.

She was so tired these days that she had lost all track of time, forgotten all about the Teelee, Earth, religion even. Everything seemed distant and dreamy, except for her and Grib struggling on and on, trying to ease pain, make death seem more acceptable. One day, after a particularly hard day's work, she said to Grib:

"The computer should have come up with something by now. Remind me to have a talk with Rodricks tomorrow, Grib. First thing in the morning."

Grib said: "I can't work with you tomorrow, Sister Mary."

"But you've got to, Grib. You can't desert me now. For God's sake."

"I'm sorry, Sister Mary. I have the plague. I am sick. I must die."

And he did. Sister Mary sat on the cart and talked to the basket that enclosed his body as they drove him to the graveyard. She no longer cared about the smell. Or really, about anything else anymore.

"I guess I've gone over the edge myself, Grib," she said, "into Rodricks's territory. I guess I've finally gone over the edge, and now I'm falling into the endless ocean of darkness. Because I just don't care about any of it anymore: the plague, the Strebe, God. I'm just too tired. Do you understand that, Grib?"

"How about you?" she asked the driver of the cart. "Do you understand?"

"I don't care," he said.

"That's it," she said, laughing hoarsely. "I'm becoming a Strebe at last. Shame you didn't live to see it, Grib."

But it wasn't until they reached the graveyard that she realized the enormity of the plague: the huge empty field covered with straw baskets packed on top of straw baskets, the incredible, unimaginable stench.

"No, I'm not going back; I'm going to stay here with my friend for a while," she told the driver of the cart. He stared expressionlessly into her eyes.

"I know," she said, "you don't care."

All day long she sat beside the basket with Grib in it. Talking to it. Phasing in and out. Hallucinating. Babbling like a lunatic to herself, to Grib.

It was toward the close of day, just as the light was fading from the sky,

that the basket began to glow. Sister Mary stepped back away from it, muttering to herself and making the sign of the cross.

"Oh God, is this real? Please tell me what's real; I don't know what's real anymore."

The basket split open, and a small, shining being emerged, slowly. Carefully.

"Grib?" she said.

"Not Grib anymore," the Teelee said, in English.

"The plague," Sister Mary muttered. "When the Strebe die, they become. . . ."

The Teelee gestured to the graveyard littered with baskets of dead Strebe. "Worthless," it said. "Not one seed in a thousand becomes a tree; not one Strebe in a million becomes a Teelee."

Sister Mary shook her head wildly: "No, no, I'm sorry, but I can't accept that; I can't accept — all this death for one Teelee."

"They are only Strebe," it said. "I go."

"Where will you go? What will you do now, Grib? I'm sorry — Yes, I know you're not Grib anymore, are you?"

"I go to be Teelee."

"Will you answer a question for me, Grib — sorry — Teelee? Will you do that?"

"Why should Teelee concern itself with you? You are to Teelee like a gnat to a human."

"But a pet gnat. Right, Grib? Sorry, not Grib. Will you answer something for me, Grib? For old times' sake, for a whim — whatever? Will you tell me, now that you're a Teelee and all, now that all these lives are thrown away just so you can do whatever it is you Teelee do, now that you've become omniscient, will you tell me" — she almost couldn't say it — "Does God exist?" she whispered in her hoarse voice.

"What you think of as God does not exist," the Teelee said. "But then, what you think of as not-God does not exist."

And just like that, he was gone, leaving Sister Mary alone with her thoughts. Which were not real. And once again Sister Mary almost had it, but it, too, was gone. Probably gone all the way to Teelee town, she said to herself. Wherever that is; or rather, whatever that is. Or maybe even, however that is. No wonder I can't understand the answers — I can't even figure out the questions. But I guess I've wasted enough time out here. I



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guess I've got to start walking back toward town, because there's work to be done. Maybe work is the answer. Now, if I can just figure out the question.

And as she walked along, she thought, Maybe I've come back over the edge again. Like Rodericks. Mysteriously, without knowing how. We humans are sure as hell no Teelee, but we're resilient. We surprise ourselves.

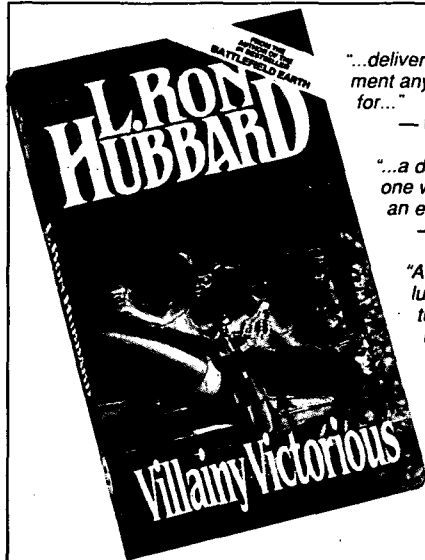
Maybe I am O.K. I've been down there and come back up. Maybe I'm a little stronger than I was before I did that. And maybe I owe that to Grib. Or to the Teelee that was Grib. Maybe he is aware of me now. Of what I'm thinking. In a burst of intuition, she understood that this was true somehow. He is aware. And he cares. Like one cares for one's pet gnat.

And then again, maybe a Teelee cares more for his pet gnat than a human cares for anything at all.

She walked a bit farther before she smiled and said softly aloud: "And maybe not."

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Chronicles of the King's Tramp, Book 1: Walker of Worlds, Tom de Haven (Doubleday/Foundation, cloth, 288pp, \$19.95)

I'LL ADMIT that one of the reasons I started reading the galleys of this book was not a nice one. I read in the author's bio that de Haven was a double-dipper in the well of literary sinecures: He was not only a creative writing teacher, but also a three-time sucker at the public teat, with two NEA fellowships and a New Jersey writing fellowship. This naturally made me skeptical, first because I always wonder about people who try to get tax money to support their hobbies, and second because I had, against my will, invested a certain percentage of my tax money in his career. I wanted to see if I was getting my money's worth.

Another reason I wanted to read this book was slightly better. Because along with his certified artsy-fartsy credentials, de Haven had also written episodes for a syndicated cartoon

series and the script for the graphic novel of *Neuromancer*. This promised that de Haven's book probably wouldn't be another one of those turgid novels that makes you long for a terminal disease so you don't have to finish it. There was hope that this guy would even have a story to tell, a rare thing indeed among the fiction writers I've known who apply for NEA money.

Then I started reading, and within a few pages all my skepticism was gone. This story is strange in all the best ways. There's plenty of dark magic and gore for those of you who were weaned on Conan or Lovecraft. Yet there's also a healthy dose of wonder and mystery, for those who bent is more toward Macdonald's *Phantastes* or Peake's *Gormenghast*. And if what you really hope for is intelligent, lively contemporary fantasy, with a 120-proof story and quirky characters, *Walker of Worlds* is a beakerful.

It doesn't end. It's the first book in a series, and it doesn't pretend otherwise. But folks, believe me, this

book does *begin*, and that's something. It starts with a dog who has suddenly become intelligent. He's just beginning to reconcile his doghood with his manwit when the Mage of Four, Mage of Luck — the story's official Bad Guy, whose face is covered with writhing slugs — gives the order for his little life to be snuffed out. But not before he's had a conversation with a spider.

From there things get wonderfully weird, from an amnesiac former writer living in a box in New York's Central Park to a hedonistic, murderous rich kid with a soul-sucking father-in-law. Almost everybody ends up in a hospital room with two unexpected exits, one of which isn't fatal. And through it all creeps a severed hand with a private agenda that doesn't include giving alms to the poor.

Can de Haven write well? Sure. Writing well is how you get public money torn from the pockets of people with honest jobs. What matters more to me is that de Haven actually has something to write, a story to tell, a world to create. Put your little hand in his, and he will *take you someplace*.

Uncle Orson says: Don't wait for the whole series to be published. This guy's visions are worth putting into your head right now.

The Hollow Earth: The Narrative

of Mason Algiers Reynolds of Virginia, Rudy Rucker, (Morrow, cloth, 288pp. \$17.95)

Rucker has set out to create a thrilling-wonder sci-fi novel, with a more-than-slightly-insane Edgar Allen Poe at off-center stage and slavery-era Virginia as the Act One scenery. And he has succeeded. The narrator, Mason Algiers Reynolds, a white boy from the Ruckerville area of Piedmont Virginia, finds himself being hunted down for murder after he tries to recover his money from a thieving whore; it's only natural he should end up downriver in Richmond on the verge of a slave revolt. Never anything but a perfectly reasonable young man, Mason still manages to get himself caught up in a balloon voyage to the south-polar entry hole into the hollow Earth.

In the tradition of the best mad-scientist writers of sci-fi, Rucker's nonsense physics sounds just plausible enough that you wish it were true. I suspect, in fact, that this book exists primarily so Rucker can show us new twists on both the hollow-Earth and counter-Earth traditions.

But the strength of the book is the people. Even though you know Rucker is playing for laughs, you can't help but get caught up in Mason's pluckiness in the face of perverse bad luck, and Rucker's Poe is the most endearingly repulsive

character I can recall having met in fiction. Even though the inside-the-Earth stuff was terrific, it still felt like something of a let-down after Rucker's wonderful evocation of antebellum Southern culture. Rucker knows the South, and you can tell he even kind of likes the folks there, even as he shows every ugly wart and chafing sore on the body politic. At times I almost wished he had just forgotten about all that hollow Earth stuff and spent the whole novel in Virginia.

But don't get me wrong: that isn't because the hollow Earth stuff isn't great. I can think of some writers who'd gladly live for a month in a crate with a dead person — like Poe does in this book — if they could only have one-tenth of the neat ideas Rucker plays with inside the hollow Earth. Can Rucker help it if, even when he's only playing, his southern characters and countryside end up with so much bright truth in them that they put all his wonderful lies to shame?

Distant Signals, Andrew Weiner, (Porcopic/Tesseract, Victoria, Canada, paper, 236pp)

When it comes to publishing, it seems like the only reason Canada hasn't been swallowed up by the U.S. is because Britain is biting down just as hard from the other side. Some-

where between the two slaving maws, however, a tiny homegrown publishing industry manages to survive, and Andrew Weiner, a Canadian who also happens to be one of the finest writers of English-language science fiction around these days, is one of those courageous, self-sacrificing souls who actually dares to have some of his books published in Canada first.

Having your first publication in Canada is, in fact, somewhat better for your career than having your first publication in, say, Guyana. It is actually conceivable that you can go to your U.S. or U.K. bookstore and arrange for them to order a copy. And I hope you will. Because *Distant Signals* is a wonderful collection of some of the most beautiful, intelligent, moving stories you're likely to read before you die and see what D.H. Lawrence and Robert Penn Warren have been writing lately.

One of the stories in this collection, "The Man Who Was Lucky," appeared in this magazine back in June of '88. Two of the stories are new. The rest have appeared here and there, making their quiet way into the minds of their readers. Weiner's ideas are as good as anybody's — an alien who joins a human encounter group in order to study us better and ends up going native; "unproductive" people struggling to find meaning in their lives during a

global economic "pause"; the time-twisting of "Klein's Machine"; the strange world of "The News from D Street," where only the graffiti artists glimpse the truth and when one person comes into the city, somebody else has to go out.

My favorite, though, is "Distant Signals" itself. There's something

sweetly ironic about the idea that somewhere there exists an audience for every work by every artist, however cynical or desperate or careless he might have been at the time of its creation. A consolation prize for artists who are still waiting for recognition: if *people* don't like your stuff, maybe somebody else will.





Blood Simple

BY ROBERT FRAZIER

A prick of the finger causes capillary
arrest. Then the smear on the glass, and . . .
zoom, you're dropping through the view field
of the lens, the microscope, behind the slide.
You see no movement down in the red zone;
here the dancers are frozen at the cotillion,
and oxygen is hidebound by hemoglobin.
Nucleic acids slow-burn at parade rest.
And deeper still hide the DNA ribbons like
winding staircases in an abandoned manse.
It's all there, all the possibilities waiting to unfold.

Rhodes scholar, fisherwoman, field hand,
the everyday next-door-neighbor madman,
the mugger, his thirty-seventh victim, his brother,
your father the cryptologist, your artistic mother,
the black sheep ramblers, corporate gamblers, blue
babies, octogenarian maybes, Olympic hopefuls . . . you.



Marnie Winston-Macauley, former prison administrator, now a full-time freelance writer (mostly non-fiction), lives in New York City with her husband Ian. "I'm 41, but of course don't look it . . . but do look a lot like a cross between Bernadette Peters and Barbara Harris, with a dash of Bette Midler." The Macauleys have one son who goes to a school not unlike the one in the mordant and very entertaining story you are about to read.

The Perfect Solution

By Marnie Winston-Macauley

LOOK. CAN WE just get right down to the bottom line?" asked Allen Seymour, barely concealing his irritation as two beads of sweat started a slow descent from his right temple. He reached for his handkerchief, moaning to himself. "Damn. I'm going to be in a goddamn pool of water by the time I get to court." He hated to sweat. Sweat made you look weak, and weak was bad for business. But above all, Allen hated being on the wrong side of the desk. Down on Centre Street, Allen Bruce Seymour was, after all, one of the highest-priced "killers" on the matrimonial circuit. Just thinking about it made his back arch, his juices flow faster. Here, on the unfamiliar ground of Saint Bartholomew's Preparatory School, he shifted in his chair uncomfortably.

"The 'bottom line,' Mr. Seymour, as I have already explained to your wife," said Dr. Wainwright, the school's headmistress, with careful deliberation, "is your son Jerome's behavior."

Eyebrows raised, she slowly fixed her gaze on Marcia Seymour, who

struggled to hide her discomfort behind primly folded, manicured hands and stiffly crossed ankles. Only Marcia's perch at the very edge of the seat gave away her mounting anxiety.

"Haven't you explained the school's position to your husband, Mrs. Seymour?" asked the stocky, gray-haired school official, her patience straining.

After 30 years the educator had learned that school-levied machetes were bad for her business, after all.

"Oh yes. Yes, of course!" blurted Marcia, her tone rising. All she could think of was the ungodly task of finding yet another "good" private school for their ten-year-old son, Jerome. Even the outrageously inflated gifts they donated no longer brought guarantees, only some last-minute interviews.

Terrified, she raced on: "And we'll do anything — right, Allen?" she said, a desperate look at her husband. "Right, Allen!" she said shrilly, desperately shifting the unholy burden.

"Right, Marsh," said Allen on cue, his clenched teeth giving small vent to the feelings his wife torpedoed.

This was not at all going Allen's way. Shit! No wonder they're still teachers. If I ran my law practice this way, I'd still be doing house closings at Jacoby & Meyers, he thought, tossing the burdensome ball yet again.

The rest of the meeting went like the other meetings at all the other places. Jerome won't listen . . . he can't concentrate . . . he teases and hits his classmates . . . he pays others to do his work for him.

"Pays others?" asked Allen, suddenly alert. This was a new one, he thought impishly, mildly surprised by his son's small entrepreneurial turn.

"Yes. We found out that he was paying little Simon Fertel to do his math work and retrieve his balls in gym."

"How much was he paying?" Allen asked with notable excitement. Marcia Seymour, leaning on one elbow, swiveled in her chair away from her husband and focused instead on a fleck of peeling salmon-colored paint on the window ledge.

Dr. Wainwright looked confused, then incredulous, as the light slowly began to dawn in the shadow of Allen's tiny smile. "Why, twenty-five cents, I think."

The hint of a smile grew at the corners of his lips. Prudently ignoring this, the weary administrator plodded on.

Through her panic, Marcia caught the tops of the familiar words: "hyperactive," "affective disorder," "impulsive control problem," "severe immaturity."

"And so, Mr. and Mrs. Seymour, we must insist that you do something about this. And soon," said the educator, removing her glasses emphatically. "After all, we have four hundred other. . ."

The words blurred. All Marcia Seymour could focus on was the one horrific, driving thought: Not one more school, dear Lord. Anything but one more school. She felt the pressure mounting in her gut as she kept playing and replaying the testing, the applications, the admission conferences, the donations, the rejections, the excuses to all their friends.

She cast a glimpse at Allen. She could tell he had already shifted gears, annoyed that his day had been disrupted.

Through the pounding in her head, she saw the headmistress rifling through some papers, signaling the end of the meeting. She heard her suggest they visit Jerome's class if they liked. She found her voice.

"Yes, thank you, thank you," said Marcia, rising slowly, backing out of the inner office like an awkward child, unsure whether the bell had indeed rung and she could leave the principal's office.

Allen, following closely behind, mumbled a barely audible, "Shit," as they left the outer office, decorated with crude wall hangings labeled "My Family Tree — 3rd Grade."

"What do you think, Allen? Should we stop in?" said Marcia, hesitating, aware of her husband's impatience.

"Look! I've already wasted enough time," he barked, then, reconsidering: "Oh, come on!" He raced ahead.

They moved quickly down the winding corridor.

"Here it is," said Marcia, pointing to a door marked "St. Bart's Fifth Graders Welcome You."

Husband and wife peered through a large glass window. Children were divided into groups of four, working on dioramas of Indian life. Everyone seemed engrossed, involved. Everyone, that is, except Jerome.

The Seymours spied their elder child dressed in his new Izod shirt and safari hat, with face as expressionless as the wax figures they posed with at Madame Tussaud's last summer, kicking the underside of the table in front of him — the very table holding the group project.

"Maybe some other time," said Allen quickly pulling them away from

the site of the impending fifth-grade apocalypse.

"You'd think they'd know how to handle one ten-year-old," Allen barked, his helplessness provoking an urgent search for suspects as they rapidly headed out the main doors.

Shaking his head vigorously as if to excuse the dybbukim that conspired to confound his day, Allen turned to Marcia as he reached his limousine. "Look, take care of this, Maze, will you!" he said hurriedly, using the pet name he reserved for his most irksome requests.

Marcia just glared at him.

Sweat was now pouring freely down his face. Dropping to one knee, hands folded in mock prayer, he pleaded, "Maze, sweetheart, do whatever you have to do. O.K.? O.K.! But please, if I don't get my ass downtown in ten minutes, I'm screwed."

He bounded into his waiting car, stuck his head out the window, and, as an afterthought, added, "See you at Donovan's at five, Maze!" This done, he blew her a kiss and frantically waved the driver on, not bothering to wait for an answer.

"Thanks," Marcia shot sullenly into the disappearing exhaust fumes, reaching into her purse for an elastic band. She tied her streaked blonde hair into a ponytail. Marcia felt the sun on her cheek, and noted it was October 1 and still warm. Removing her cashmere blazer, she decided to walk.

She had to think.

ONE OF New York's three or four perfect days, a beautiful Indian summer day, she thought wistfully. A super day for a game of tennis with her best friend, Lydia, then a stroll over to Zabar's for a half-pound of shrimp and Russian potato salad. She closed her eyes and could actually smell the blending of the savory fish and aromatic coffees. A great day for a walk through the park with Molli, her tow-haired four-year-old, after her nursery school bus delivered her to their Central Park West co-op.

What a perfect day — if it weren't for. . . . She let it go with a sigh and the familiar pang of frustration she always felt when she thought about her elder child.

It wasn't that Marcia didn't love the boy. She assigned to him the same sort of affectionate obligation she gave to all things that were "hers."

It was just that everything was so — well — *difficult* with Jerome.

Jerome. Marcia's brows knitted as she tried to conjure pictures of him as an infant, then a toddler. But all she could manage were a series of mental stills, like some yearly parade of Sears holiday-photo ads she saw in *TV Guide*. Marcia did have a vague memory of a fussy baby. One who didn't smile much, either. But then again, she couldn't be sure. She and Allen had been away a lot those first years.

"Those first years," she sighed with her usual blend of longing and remorse. That was when Allen had just started to make it.

She would never forget how upset he was at the news of her pregnancy — "How could you *do* this to me, especially when you just started aerobics at the Sutton South Health Club!" Allen wailed. Not at all like with Molli, later on, when things were more settled.

Following her mother's advice, she trod carefully, deciding not to play the baby up until he got used to the idea. And, after the backslaps from colleagues and, most of all, his parents, he did, of course, eventually get used to the idea.

"But I always come first, right, Mazie?" he cooed in her ear the night they finally made love again, when she was six months along.

Armed with better survival instincts than insight, she readily understood her position. The very next morning, she hired that au pair from Haiti.

"It was just after *she* left that it all became impossible," Marcia whined aloud to no one in particular. First there were the complaints from the mothers as he terrorized other children, then later storekeepers as he whipped goods off of shelves, and now schools. More than once it got so bad, Allen booked a month's cruise for the two of them.

And throughout there was the endless stream of neurologists, psychologists, psychiatrists. And of course nannies. From Ireland, the Bahamas, Israel, the Philippines. "Next week we're hiring a lady sumo wrestler from Japan at two thou a week," Allen would tell their friends as each au pair quit in succession.

"Why me?" she wondered, railing against the unfairness of it all. What about all those mother/child courses she took at the Ninety-second Street Y? "I mean, just how much am I supposed to *take*?" she said as she rushed across Madison.

"Just look at Molli," she whined. Didn't everyone love Molli? Even

Allen was captivated, calling her "Daddy's Dolly." But then, who could help but love that angelic smile, those strawberry-blond curls? After all, if Marcia could produce a Molli, she certainly couldn't be blamed for a Jerome, right?

The sight of the Met broke her reverie. How she ached to go in and just get lost among the priceless Rembrandts and Titians.

"But not today, 'Maze,'" she chided herself sarcastically, using Allen's loaded pet name. For underneath his little playful song and dance on the street this morning, she recognized the icy, implicit command that she "fix" this thing with Jerome, and soon. Another meeting like today, and, well, as her mother would remind her, "Good providers don't grow on trees," or, "You can't expect a man to keep coming home to stress, now, can you?" Epithets carefully embroidered onto the fabric of her personality.

Unfortunately, as she discovered some five years into her marriage, both were true.

Marcia was so engrossed that she nearly tripped over something in her path.

"Good Lord! What's this?" she said, sidestepping the obstacle. "God, it's gorgeous!" she exclaimed, stooping to retrieve a maroon alligator briefcase, amazed it hadn't been stolen, lying in plain sight along a walkway through Central Park.

"Now, let's see what we have here," she mumbled, looking around furtively. She fiddled with the combination, and was quickly rewarded when a simple triple-zero setting unlocked the case, revealing some sort of flyer.

Marcia scanned the printed notice quickly, squinting in the bright noon light. The bold print immediately caught her attention: "PARENTS: HAVE YOU HAD IT WITH YOUR PROBLEM CHILD?!" Marcia felt her heart begin to pound. She yanked open her bag and scrambled for her glasses.

PARENTS: HAVE YOU HAD IT WITH YOUR PROBLEM CHILD?? DO YOU FIND TIME WITH YOUR TOT TERRIFYING?? HAS YOUR OFFSPRING GOT YOU UNSPRUNG??

If your answer is "YES,"

WE HAVE JUST WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR (YES, YOU!).

It's
THE PERFECT SOLUTION.

IF: You've have enough of do-nothing discipline (and we know you have!);

IF: Your shrink makes you shudder (and we know he does!);

IF: You're fed up with failure (and we know you are!);

and

You're willing to pay the piper (and we know you will!) —

Come to our PERFECT SOLUTION office, 3 short city blocks south of Belvedere Lake, Central Park, New York. Intake hours: noon - 12:30 P.M. today. Ask for Barnabas L. Zhebab, Fides Punica (F.P.), M.S.W. Emeritus.

ALL RESULTS GUARANTEED. ALL RESULTS GUARANTEED. ALL RESULTS GUARANTEED.

Marcia's mind raced. The words blurred in front of her. Finally the office hours swam into view.

Like a shot, she flew into action. "Omigod! What time is it? What time is it?" she screeched, struggling frantically with the buttons on her silk cuff, nearly ripping the fragile material getting to her Rolex.

"Twelve-eighteen! Thank you, God," she silently gasped, praying they would still be open. Grabbing the briefcase, she bolted into the park.

As she saw the lake up ahead, she abandoned her practiced jogger's lope and broke into a frenzied gallop.

Suddenly, up ahead, she saw a small wood frame shed, the kind that commonly sold peanuts, popcorn, or silly pennants with cheap plastic dolls tied to the end, proclaiming the courageous tourist's foray into "Central Park, New York."

Attached to the sloping roof was a silk-screened sign proclaiming "HOME OF THE PERFECT SOLUTION" in bold print.

The place seemed deserted, silent, except for a soft, shrill whistling sound in the distance. The remnant of a police or ambulance siren, maybe. Or perhaps one of those infernal car alarms.

Tentatively, she approached the door. Marcia peeked at her watch: 12:26. She pulled a comb, mirror, and lipstick from her purse and, despite trembling hands, made quick repairs with practiced efficiency.

Revvng up her confidence, she knocked rapidly on the wooden door.

"*Entrez! Entrez! Entrez!*, my dear lady!" a voice boomed from inside. Marcia instinctively jumped back, startled, then slowly cracked open the door and peered in. The room was bare except for a small wooden chair and an ornate antique desk.

Sitting behind the desk, with hands carefully folded in front of him, was a tall, exceptionally distinguished man, impeccably dressed and coiffed, with the most disarmingly penetrating steel eyes she had ever seen. But more than his clothes and those blazing eyes, she noticed his age, or, her inability to fix a year or even a decade on this remarkable presence. Their eyes met. His gaze was so powerful it enervated her.

"H-how did you know I was a lady?" she sputted weakly.

"*Bravo, ma pauvre amie!* Is she perceptive? I ask you?" he replied as flecks of light danced mockingly in his eyes. He bounded over the desk, arms stretched outward. "To be perfectly cricket, while we know madam is a woman, *n'est-ce pas*, we don't actually know if madam is a 'lady,' now, do we? Or, if you *are* a 'lady' — he fixed his eyes on hers — "just how much of one you may be."

"I . . . I just meant. . .," she interrupted, bumbling, almost speechless.

"I know *exactly* what you meant, my dear lady. Oh-oh. There I go again. But you see, it is *always* the w-o-m-a-n, *la femme*, the mama-san, the mommy, if you will, who winds up here."

"Well, uh, I hope I'm not too late," she said, changing the subject, not at all sure she should have come. "I mean, it is" — she checked her watch — "12:29, and your flyer said you close at 12:30."

"My dear lady, you must learn to be less hasty in your conclusions, *on qui trop se hâte reste en chemin, nu mammala!*"

"I'm sorry, but I don't. . ."

"INtake. IN-take. My flyer said IN, IN, as in 'inSIDE,' 'inTREPID,' 'in-SECURE,' 'inCOME.' If one wanted to put one out, one would not have said 'intake'; one would have said 'outtake,' *n'est-ce pas?*"

From a backward stance, he leaped upon the desk with a flourish, and looked soulfully into her eyes. Again she thought she heard the soft, familiar whistle, but found herself quickly diverted as he whirled the case out of her hand. "Ah. I see you have retrieved my *attaché*. *Muchos gracias*. You see, it was a gift from a former client — an attractive, Gucci-sized creature much like yourself," he sighed wistfully.

Marcia stood awkwardly, still unsure of this whole thing. "Are you the one in charge?" she ventured timidly.

He broke into a thunderous laugh, then jumped in front of her and saluted.

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am Barnabas Lucien Zhebab. Call me B.L. All my girls do." He took hold of her right hand and brought it to his lips.

"Now. Take a load off!" he shot at her, nodding toward the hard, slatted folding chair. She plopped down, startled.

"So tell me, ole gal, just how might I assist you?" His eyes resumed their playful twinkle. "Tell me all, mama miserable." His tone regained its empathetic envelope. "The *ganza tsimmis*. The whole horrible *histoire*. And," he added conspiratorially, "do you know what will happen?"

"No," she croaked, spellbound. "What will happen?" she repeated mechanically.

"Together," he said, at first sotto voce. "Together!" — his tone dramatically ascending — "we will find — the perfect solution."

"Oh yes. Oh God. Yes. Yes," Marcia rejoined, entranced.

"Now," he replied matter-of-factly, opening the top drawer of the desk and pulling out a sheaf of printed forms. "Let us meander down the path of little Jerome's psyche and *vaille que vaille*, shall we?"

"But how did you know his n—?" Marcia sputtered. His raised hand interrupted her. "Dear *scidcco*, with mind as transparent as yours, who cannot help but absorb the bare essentials?"

Unwilling to confuse the issue with logic, Marcia marveled at his sensitivity.

Throughout her reverie, he began making furious marks on one of his forms, mumbling to himself, "Mm, D.O.B., place, time, pregnancy, et cetera, et cetera, et ceteRA! Done!"

"There are, however, just a few more questions about Gerald," he added, settling comfortably into his black leather chair, fingers together in pyramid fashion.

"That's Jerome," she said.

"Ah yes. How clever of you." He wrote with a flourish, "Mother: 'Excellent re-sponse time.'"

"Now," he began. "Chronic whiner and/or complainer?" Nod. Check.

"Hyper and/or eyes dead, expressionless?" Nod. Check.

"Generally nasty and/or abusive?" Nod. Check.

"Tantrums and/or significant destruction of property and/or cruelty upon persons, most often family members, more than two times per day?"

"That's him!" Marcia blurted. "That's Jerome! Can you help me? Can you do what you promised in your flyer?"

In her desperation she jumped up and tried to grab hold of him.

"*Calmez-vous, madam*. Get hold of thyself," he said, slightly put out by her outburst. He stood up and straightened his jacket, then turned toward her.

"Of course we can take care of all this, my sorrowful little sparrow." He walked behind his desk again.

"And with a wee sleight of hand," he said, slipping into perfect brogue. "Here 'tis, lassie!" he said, as he magically produced a medium-sized burlap bag from somewhere underneath.

"Where? What?" Marcia asked, incredulous.

"Why, with this! Voila! Your perfect solution!" He spilled the contents of the bag onto the desk.

Scattered all around were, it appeared, odd-size, coin-shaped chocolate candies, wrapped in brightly colored aluminum foil.

"Holiday candy is the perfect solution?" she asked, mystified.

"Ignore the candy part. That's just to sweeten things up a little." He chuckled at this little frivolity.

"Take a closer look. Each coin, if you will, is marked with an amount that is also, you can see, color- and size-coded."

Marcia put on her glasses and gave the candies a more earnest inspection. She saw that the smaller red foils had "100" impressed on them; the larger blue, "250"; the gold "500"; and so on.

"I don't understand," Marcia said, disappointed.

"*Ma pauvre victim*, I am giving you the solution to end all other solutions. For the paltry sum of \$700 — no, with your 4 percent discount for coming in on a Friday, let us say, \$670, hmm, oh, what the hay, how about a round \$666? — I am giving you THE BARNABAS CHIT SYSTEM!"

"The Barnabas *what* system?" she repeated, wide-eyed.

"*Mon Dieu!* That's 'CHit, CHit' as in 'itty, 'itty Bang Bang!" he boomed, offended.

"Anyway," he explained, "to effectively *change* the little bugger's be-

havior, to touch the heart, the very *coglioni* of this family, you must begin with 'Chits.'"

Marcia, confused, cocked her head toward him intently.

"Now think, my sweet *asino*," he said, taking her cheeks in his hands. "What one thing, more than anything else, sets little Gerard's heart atremble? Your hugs, your approval?" he asked with the faintest hint of sarcasm.

She shook her head.

"Money, maybe," she responded, brows knitting.

"You think so, do you? And how, may I ask, does he use this money? To buy toys, clothes, small gifts for you, for his sister, for himself, perhaps?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she sniffed. "Jerome has every meaningful advantage. Of course, we don't believe in spoiling him, but —"

"*Mais non*," he interrupted, clucking. "And now back to Dan Rather and the six o'clock news," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Never mind, dear. The point is, if he doesn't use his money to actually purchase things, then what exactly does he do with it?"

"Well, he likes to take it out and count it sometimes. Collect it, I guess. Actually, he does that with his play money, too."

"Aha! Now we're getting somewhere. And just how does he use his play money?"

"Why, in games, mostly."

"The kind of games where stakes are involved. Small wagers, *peut-être*!" he said knowingly.

"Yes!" said Marcia, excited. "That's it!" She suddenly remembered Jerome's obsession with his blackjack computer disk, playing it over and over — racking up points, then losing them, then paying himself off in play money.

"Aha! There it is. You see, your son has what we in the biz call *un tyrannus ad nauseam* complex, which is severely complicated by a massive case of *loco parentis*," he said, shaking his head and clucking.

"Dear Lord! Is it serious?"

"I'm afraid so. But eminently solvable. In fact, I consider it my mission to work with families like yours."

"Well, what do we do?" Marcia asked, anxious to get started.

"Now, here's where THE BARNABAS CHIT SYSTEM comes in. You

see, we here at Perfect Solution were trained in the *Diable à Quatre* theory.

"It's French, Marseea. I always trust the French in matters of mental health," he said with gravity. "You see, in layman's terms, you son is, as the kids would say, 'into' power. The need, if you will, to control, to hold on and let go. Freud and Erikson, no doubt, would call it anal-retentive behavior," he muttered to himself.

"Anyway, if we bond little Jason's behavior to his fascination with control, then we have the perfect solution," he said, his steel eyes taking on an iridescent glow, then quickly fading as he saw the perplexed expression on her face.

"Look!" he hissed, exasperated. "You give this kid chits when he's good and take them back when he's bad," he explained abruptly.

"Ah ha," she said slowly, still obviously confused.

"You see," said Zhebab, valiantly trying another approach, "through letting little Jackie purchase his own behavior, he can now make his own choices, buy his own happiness."

"Like in Bloomingdale's!" Marcia interjected, pleased with her apt analogy.

"Like in Bloomingdale's," he sighed, resigned.

"Just think of it," he said, recapturing his enthusiasm. "*He* can decide when and if to be naughty or nice. *He* can decide how much his choice is worth to him. Why, Maze, ole girl, *he* can elect to save or to spend, to rack up a stack, count it, budget it." Eyes shining, he was caught up in the rhythm.

"And when Jakey's naughty — no more lectures, no more scoldings, no more spankings, no more shrinks. All he has to do is give up some of the chits he's earned with his good behavior. *And*," he added with a flourish, "he even gets to eat the chocolate inside before he parts with the numbered wrapper! Is this fun or what?"

"You know, you may have something there!" She leaped out of her seat, then suddenly shrank back.

"Uh-oh. But how will I know how many chits to give out and how many he should give up? The amounts, I mean. Aren't they all different?" Her elation began to turn to worry.

"Here's the list," he shot back sharply, vaulting a scrolled-up computer printout onto her lap. "It contains everything you need, *ma petite bête*," he said, a grin forming at the corners of his mouth.

She unraveled the sheet. Printed on the left side, in alphabetical order, was a list of "good" deeds and what each was worth. The first, for example, was "Attitude-Good," under which there were varying lengths of time and the exact number of chits to be paid. The right side contained a similar list of "offenses" and what each of *these* would cost. The sheet was remarkably detailed.

"My Lord," Marcia commented, concerned. "This certainly seems like a lot of work."

"Not to fear, precious. The list is electronically coded to this," he said, pulling a chromium-plated watch from his pocket. "Which," he continued, "little Geraldo will wear," he added, handing her the band.

"It doesn't look like much," she noted, unimpressed. "It's no different from a Timex."

"Oh, but you're wrong, you Marcia Marcos, you." He took the watch from her and rapidly made some adjustments. "Listen."

Marcia heard a whistle — the same shrill sound heard earlier outside. "Now, what does this do?" she asked, confused.

"You just put this little gizmo, my overwhelmed ostrich, on sonny's little wrist at home, and anytime he's due for something or other, it'll go off.

"If he's good and *entitled* to chits, you'll hear a cute little melody. We kind of thought the theme from 'The Brady Bunch' rather apt." He swiftly broke into song. "'Here's the story . . . bumbum . . . of a lovely lady . . . bumbumbum. . . ' Well, anyway, you get the idea.

"Now, if he *owes* chits, the watch will just give a whistle. In either case, when the thing rings out, the behavior will light up on your sheet. So you see, my *poco perro perezoso*, you need do little more than give 'em out and take 'em back."

"Oh well. I can do *that*," she giggled cheerfully. "You're sure there's a listing for *each* behavior?" she asked, a hesitation in her voice.

"My dear lady," he answered swiftly, "even we, with all our resources, cannot promise that *every* possibility is accounted for. Besides, the little artiste should have *some* creative control, should he not? The watch, however, is so finely attuned to the subject's subconscious that it will go off anyway, list or no list.

"Now, we're all set, except, of course, for the check, and a small waiver — hold harmless and all that," he said, scooping up the chits and handing her the bag.

"Are you sure this will work — really sure?" Marcia repeated, fishing in her purse for her checkbook, her anxiety momentarily returning.

"Madam. I am as sure as I am that the two of us are standing here, in this most magnificent of parks. I am as sure as . . . as I know there is a God in His Heaven and —"

"And all's right with the world," she jumped in, pleased with herself.

"Yes, Marcia Phyllis Seymour," he said slowly, "and all's right with the world!" he affirmed, grin spiraling into a rip-roaring laugh.

O MIGOD! WHAT *happened* here?" Marcia shrieked as she entered her apartment.

"My vase!" she screeched, and she saw the antique crystal cylinder the Sterns bought for them on their cruise to China, smashed to pieces.

Her cries brought Geneva, the nanny, running out from one of the bedrooms.

"Now, missy," she cried, her singsong island cadence rising hysterically in defense. "I try to keep your son in line, but he don' wanna behave. I say to him, 'How you gonna grow up like *that*, mister!' And what he do to that little Molli. Chasin' that little angel and makin' such a ruckus. I tell you, missy, a child like *that* got the devil in him," she said with rapid-fire speed, furiously shaking her head. During this tirade the fortyish au pair was constantly busy — getting the broom, sweeping up broken pieces, and *clucking*.

Before Marcia had a chance to recover, Molli came bolting out, curls plastered to her sweat-stained forehead, tears running down her cheeks.

"Mommy! Mommy!" The little girl ran into her mother's arms, screeching.

"What, my precious?" asked Marcia, embracing her daughter.

"Jerome's being mean again," she whined. "He wouldn't let me play with the Nintendo, and he called me a stupid baby. You *said* I could play with it whenever I wanted, didn't you, Mommy? *Didn't* you? And Jerome *has* to let me, right, Mommy? Ev'ryone knows he's just a big jerk. 'Jerome is a je-rk,'" she taunted in singsong voice.

Marcia could see Jerome peering out from behind the half-opened door to his room down the hall, listening.

"Now, shush, darling. Of course you can play," said Marcia, stroking Molli's wet cheek. And louder: "I also said that good boys aren't naughty. Because good boys know how lucky they are to have a beautiful little

sister and parents who can buy them Nintendos," she added, her voice now audible in any one of their twelve rooms.

"Right, Geneva?" winking at the au pair.

"Oh yes, missy," said Geneva, playing along.

"Well, if *Jerome* doesn't appreciate us, maybe we should just find somebody else — some *better* little boy to bring home, right, Molli?" she added conspiratorially, looking at her daughter's smiling face.

"Jerk jerk jerk jerk!" Molli contributed. Content, she stuck her left thumb in her mouth.

The two women heard a massive slam, as Jerome got up, opened his door wide, and kicked it shut.

Marcia ran over to the closed door.

"Jerome! Jerome Brett Seymour, don't you dare slam a door on me! Open this up. Now!" she screamed.

From inside the room, she heard a lock turning, the sound of things being thrown and breaking.

"Jerome! Do you hear me? I'm going to count to three, and you better open that door," she threatened. "One . . . two . . . two and a half. Are you moving? Two and three-quarters. . . ."

"I hate you!" came the voice from behind the door. Then silence.

Helpless, Marcia gave up. "Just finish cleaning up, Geneva," she sighed. "I'm going to rest until I have to meet Mr. Seymour," she said, wearily reaching for her pillbox and removing three Advils and a broken half of a little blue Valium tablet.

"Yes, missy," Geneva nodded, reaching for the broom again.

Marcia gathered up her bag, then slowly removed a gold-wrapped chit. She fingered the chit for a minute, feeling its texture, its calming effect; then turned toward her bedroom.

"Oh, and wake me at four, will you, Geneva?" she sighed wearily. "I'm meeting Mr. Seymour at five," she said, referring to the twice-weekly "date" their former marriage counselor had recommended to break up Allen's thirteen-hour days.

"Yes, missy," she said aloud.

"Oh Lordy. It's gonna take a holy miracle to quiet *this* house," muttered the nanny as she absentmindedly twisted the small gold crucifix around her neck while gathering up the rest of the Seymours' broken shards.

* * *

Donovan's was one of the new grazing places that had opened in New York the past few years. Owned by WSLB's rockin' radio drive-time D.J., Brooklyn's Battery Bob Donovan, it had quickly become an in place.

It had also become a second home to the Seymours.

Ever since Allen had handled Battery Bob's divorce (the nickname turned out to be unusually apt, as the *Weekly Inquisitor* hastened to point out), the Seymours were "A"-group material, almost always seated within the VIP area (as described in *Gotham* magazine), and Bobby himself would eventually make his way to their table for an obligatory schmooze at least once.

"So that's the deal, huh?" said Allen, picking at his "*calamares a la plancha*," his eyes alternately darting around the room and to the door.

"That's it," said Marcia eagerly. "So what do you think?"

"I think you got screwed out of seven hundred bucks. That's what I think. Hey Carlos," he boomed at the maître d', who was seating another couple. "What the hell is this?" he asked, annoyed, pointing his knife at the visceral things in the tiny plate he had been eating from.

"You said you wanted to try something new, sir," Carlos replied stiffly.

"For twenty-two bucks? New, yes. Alive, no." His chuckle allowed just enough of his irritation to seep through. "Jesus, where's Bobby tonight?"

"Mr. Donovan should be in shortly. Shall I send him over, Mr. Seymour?" was the maître d's dry response.

"Do that, will you?" said Allen, now freely put out. "Damned uppity..." he mumbled.

"Allen!" said Marcia, frantically trying to redirect him. "About the chit system. What do you think? We've got to do *something*, and this Mr. Zhebab seemed to understand Jerome's problem." She ran on. "So what do you think? I mean, I think we should give it a try. So should we give it a try?" she asked, desperately vying for his attention each time the door opened.

"All right. All right," said Allen, eyes darting nervously. "Anything just as long as you don't drag me to that damn school anymore. You know, I was almost *late* today! I'm gawner speak to Bob about this," he stewed, reverting back to his Northeast Bronx accent.

"About Jerome?" Marcia asked, confused.

His eyes rolled back. "Jesus Christ, Marcia. Don't be an idiot! About that damn maître d' and this goddamn twenty-two-buck octopus!"

he seethed, stabbing his plate, teeth gritted.

THE VERY next day, Marcia began in earnest what later became known as "Operation J.C." ("Jerome: Chit").

Starting with breakfast, she outlined the details of the "operation."

Explaining the system slowly and carefully, Marcia then produced the watch, the sheet, and the bag of shiny chits with their embossed points. Even Allen seemed impressed with the array of multicolored coins and electronic coding business.

"Look, mommy, shiny candy! Can I have some?" squealed Molli, jumping up and down.

"Mommy already explained these are special candies called chits that are going to make Jerome a good boy," Marcia soothed.

Jerome sat, leaning on his hand, sulking and silent. "Yeah, sure," was his only audible response; however, one could detect a faint glimmer of interest in his otherwise-vacant eyes.

"Here, Mother will put this watch on for you," coaxed Marcia, lifting his limp hand awkwardly in order to fasten it.

The moment the watch was buckled, they heard the droning of what sounded like computerized electronic music. Startled, the Seymours sat listening.

"It's 'The Brady Bunch'!" yelled Jerome, jumping up and putting the watch to his ear. "I recognize it from 'Nik at Night'!" he added, referring to the twenty-four-hour children's cable network.

Impressed, he suddenly grew attentive.

"Look. He's getting all hyper," Allen complained.

Jerome just glared at him.

"This is what I was trying to tell you," said Marcia to Allen. "You see, it works. Now, let me just look on the sheet here," she murmured, reaching for her glasses.

"Aha! And here it is! Look. Under 'DOES WHAT HE'S TOLD: ten seconds or less — 550 chits,'" said Marcia proudly to the group.

"Well, here they are!" said Marcia brightly, ceremoniously presenting him with his first reward, one blue chit and three red ones.

"You mean, every time I do something right, I get these?" asked Jerome incredulous.

"That's what we said," commented Allen, who, after watching all this, now decided to get involved.

"I want one, too! Gimme one, too! I wanna watch with music, and I want the candy money!" hollered Molli, reaching for her brother's wrist.

"Get away, pest!" Jerome shrieked, bopping her on the head with his fist.

"Why you. . . !" Allen started.

They all fell silent as they heard the annoying whine of a whistle emanating from the watch.

Marcia checked her list.

"That'll cost you 250," was all she said.

"That's it?" Jerome asked, incredulous, looking anxiously at his father.

"I guess that's it," shrugged Allen, shaking his head.

"And I can even eat the chocolate inside?" Jerome added, unwrapping his blue one marked "250," putting the paper carefully to one side, and popping the contents in his mouth.

Marcia nodded her assent.

He got up from the table slowly, thoughtfully, little flecks of light starting to dance in his eyes, and walked slowly to his room.

They heard his door close.

"This just might work," Marcia ran on, flushed, daring to hope. "Please let it work," she silently prayed.

"Oh Geneva," she called impulsively to the au pair, now doing dishes.

"Hand me that picture in the desk drawer in the dining room, will you, dear. The photo in the gilt-edged frame — you know, the one of Allen, Molli, and me crouching over the goose Mr. Seymour had just bagged during that camping trip? I think Jerome was standing behind us. Anyway, you remember. It's the one Jerome always broke because he hated it so?"

"Yes, missy," she said, shaking her head.

"Well, take it out and dust it off, will you, dear?" Marcia said decisively.

"Oh, and Geneva. . . ."

"Yes, missy?" said the au pair, agitated.

"If you don't stop twisting that necklace, you'll break that little crucifix you love so much, and we couldn't have that happen, now, could we?" Marcia added confidently, with more bravado than conviction.

The next few days proved a nightmarish roller-coaster ride for the

Seymours. Jerome, intrigued with the novelty of it all, played the game like some kind of one-on-one, never-ending blackjack deal. He would come home, do his homework, win a few chits, then proceed to whittle down his winnings by devising little tortures for the Seymours. For Jerome, the exercise was mildly amusing — aimlessly shoving stacks of chits back and forth, forth and back. Aimless, except for its ability to drive Marcia to distraction, hopping around at the sound of whistles and seemingly endless choruses of "The Brady Bunch" as her son smugly plopped the contents of one colored chit after another into his mouth.

"He's become a worse goddamn smart-ass than ever, Marcia!" Allen glared while Jerome, hiding in his room, listened intently through a crack in his door.

"Did you hear that arrogant brat when I asked him why he just stood there in Little League this morning?" Allen ranted. "Just stood there not giving a good goddamn when the ball practically hit him on his goddamn head! And of course, you know who *witnessed* this, don't you, Marcia! Only little Brent Besterman's father, that's who! Only Mr. Justice Samuel Irving Besterman, State Supreme Court, New York County, *that's* who! And what does your son say at dinner when I tell him I never want to see that crap again? 'I d-o-n't g-i-v-e a s-h-i-t,' he says. Then he oh so casually drops 450 whatever of those choco-locos of yours, and he's off. Hell of a good job, Marsh. Two real winners I've got here. The airhead and the Omen," he shot sarcastically.

"Look," Marcia ran on desperately. "It's only been a week, and tomorrow we're going to the Hamptons to look at summer places, and you know how much Jerome likes the Hamptons with the boat and Sara there and everything. I mean, you know she's his only friend . . . and —"

"I d-o-n't g-i-v-e a s-h-i-t!" yelled Allen, mimicking his son. "If you want to continue this Hershey hoax, that's up to you, but I've had it. He is *not* going. Do you hear? I don't bust my nut for this million-buck co-op that's always a holy Hell, maids that come and go like Grand Central Station, prep schools that turn up their noses like they're smelling something and *we're* it, to throw away fifteen grand a season to have my summer ruined by that ten-year-old terror. *Camp. That's* where he's going! Sleep-away camp. For ten weeks. *Twelve*, if we can find one. Where they never *heard* of Long Island. And then, sleep-away *school*. With sleep-away *holidays* and

sleep-away recess! It's time we Seymours — you, me, and Molli — started living!" he thundered.

Jerome, crouched near the door, closed it softly. He sat, head down, for a very long time. He thought he heard the faint whine of a whistle. Not from his watch this time. From somewhere outside, far away. Then, slowly, the whistle turned into a laugh. He got up slowly and walked to his bedroom mirror. Peering intently, Jerome suddenly knew where the sound came from. From somewhere deep inside himself, he came to realize. The little flecks of light in his eyes grew brighter, casting shadows on his face as they played at the corner of his eyes. And then he knew. . . .

"Listen. When I'm wrong, I say so, right, Maze? And I was wrong," said Allen rhetorically, breaking his croissant in half. "You wouldn't believe it's the same boy, Judi, especially after that first week."

"No kidding, Al?" asked Judi's husband, Howard, biting into his baby carrot. "This chit business really works, eh? Maybe we should try it with our Jennifer; what do you say, hon?" he chided his wife.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," said Rona Sygel, seating to his left. "Why, your Jennifer is a doll, just like my Jason — or the Seymours' Molli. Right, Stewie?" She turned to her own husband.

It was Halloween eve. Exactly thirty days since "Operation J.C.," and the Seymours were entertaining the two couples they had become close to since they moved into the co-op.

"I mean, just look at how he's behaved today. Not a peep. That's typical," said Marcia, relighting one of the tapers that had gone out. "It's like a real miracle."

"And the little 'miracle' is sitting right there," said Allen, nodding toward his wife. "The blonde with the tiny — but, God knows, expensive — little nose," he added teasingly.

Reddening, Marcia quickly diverted. "Oh, and the school. . . ," she started.

"Marsh got a call from that biddy, Wainwright, the other day. . . ," said Allen, jumping in.

"And she just couldn't stop *raving* about, you know who!" Marcia finished. "Just clear the dishes and bring in the tea, and you can go now, Geneva!" she yelled into the kitchen. "Anyway —"

"Anyway." Allen picked up the story from there. "She fawned all over Marcia. 'We never saw such an improvement. And so soon!' he mimicked in falsetto voice, grinning.

"So what did you tell her, Marcia?" asked Stewart.

"What, tell her!" Allen interrupted. "I wrote her a donation for a thousand bucks!" he said, chuckling as he relit his pipe.

The men laughed.

"Anyway," Marcia continued. "You know, if someone didn't actually see Jerome come in, we'd never even know he was *here*. He comes home from school, does his homework, and heads straight for his room. Spends hours in there happily doing . . . whatever. Not a word at dinner, helps clear the dishes, then back to his room again. And all the time we hear that little watch go off with the cute little melody."

"Well, doesn't he have to come to get his candy, or chits?" asked Howard.

"Oh no. After the first week, he just put the whole mess in a closet in his room. Insisted he would do his own bookkeeping and coin collecting," Allen explained.

"Not only that, he even makes up his own rewards for behavior that isn't on the sheet," added Marcia.

"Amazing," Howard whistled. "When did all this change, anyway? I thought the chit thing was a bust the first week."

"That's the funny thing," said Marcia. "So did we. I guess it started that Sunday we trekked out to the Hamptons to look for our beach house. Jerome seemed, I don't know, different. He asked if he could walk around the beach while we made the grand tour with the agent — said he needed some more something. Anyway, later we found him — you won't believe this — picking up glass and other garbage and throwing it all in the public wastebaskets! Said the stuff was dangerous to walk on, and people might get hurt during the summer. Isn't that something? I mean, with him thinking he wasn't even going, and all!"

"And you should have heard that watch goin' off like crazy," said Allen. "Sounded like a goddamn 'Brady Bunch' reunion! I think he gave himself like fifteen hundred chits that night. And from then on it's been just like that."

"He must have enough chits to choke a horse!" Stewart remarked.

"Listen. You know what they say about gift horses," quipped Rona.

"Oh, and remember that gilt-edged framed picture of us when we were camping?" Marcia quickly interjected.

"You mean the one Jerome always threw against the wall?" asked Judi.

"And the door and the ceiling," added Rona sarcastically.

"That's the one. Anyway, you'll never guess where it is right now," Marcia gushed. After a respectable rhetorical pause: "It's sitting right on Jerome's desk, in his room!" she blurted.

"Unbelievable," said Judi.

"Yes," said Marcia wistfully, pouring the Earl Grey and passing down filled cups. "I can just feel there are big changes in store for Allen, Molli, and me."

"And you deserve it," Howard offered.

"Amen," chorused the group.

"But you know," Marcia said, puzzled, "Dr. Wainwright mentioned that Jerome still doesn't smile."

"Come on, Maze. What's he got *not* to smile about?" said Allen confidently. "Right?" he asked rhetorically. "Goddamn right!" he answered, leaning back in his chair, drawing on his pipe, eminently satisfied.

From the desk in his room where he was busily calculating, Jerome Seymour recognized the milling sounds of his parents' guests getting ready to leave. He heard the exclamations amid promises of future dates as the front door opened and closed intermittently.

Good, he thought. They'll all be gone in a minute.

He heard the opening strains of "I Got You Babe" emanating from his wrist.

"Let me see," he said thoughtfully, reaching for his coded list. "Here it is," he said, finding the lighted text. "DINNER PARTY: NO INTERRUPTION.' That's another twelve hundred."

He felt anticipation building.

"Maybe it's enough!" he said, trying to hold back his excitement until he followed the proper procedure.

He dutifully removed the chits from their place in his closet, allocated the proper number to the secret compartment on the right-hand side of his drawer, and finally, carefully, wrote "1,200" in his now-full ledger.

Marcia brought the last of the cups and saucers into the kitchen.

"Let Geneva do them tomorrow, hon," said Allen, following behind.

As usual, Molli came scampering out for her nightly juice. "Mommy. Daddy. Gimme a drink. I wanna drink."

"Of course, Daddy's Dolly," said Allen, scooping her up. "And then we'll all stop in and see Jerome before we turn in," said Allen to his family, his mood now benevolent. "He probably gave himself a big reward for his behavior tonight."

"We have to anyway. I promised we would stop by," Marcia said, yawning. "Wait a minute. Did you hear that?" Marcia cocked her head.

"What?" asked Allen.

"That whistling sound. Listen. It's getting louder."

"Mm. Did you leave the kettle on?" Allen wondered.

"I don't think so," Marcia answered, snapping on the kitchen light to check. "No. Nothing in here," she said, handing Molli a paper cup filled with juice. "Must be a car alarm or something," she commented, snapping off the light again and stretching, as the sound grew more pervasive.

"Must be. Anyway, let's go. After all, my amazin' Maze and Daddy's Dolly, it's late, and I guess we should try and make Jerome's big payoff," said Allen.

He put his arm around his wife's tanned, sloping shoulders, hoisted Molli onto his back, and, all together, they padded down the long corridor.

Jerome heard them all coming.

He put down his pen carefully. He had gone over the figures twice.

He had enough now.

He was sure.

After weeks of planning, hoarding, it was finally time.

After all the years. . . .

He solemnly reopened the right-hand drawer of his desk and withdrew each gaily colored chit, one by one.

When he was finished and they were meticulously arranged on his desk in neat piles from high to low, he began unwrapping each in turn, mechanically placing one piece of chocolate after another into his mouth.

He savored the rich, bittersweet taste as he longingly fingered the gilt-edged frame — the frame housing three laughing, crouching Seymours, one dead goose, a still-smoking rifle — and Jerome.

They were closer now, almost there.

He heard their banter, their giggles, the intimate sounds of a happy family, as his doorknob started to turn.

With one stroke of the pencil, he struck the credit side of his ledger clean.

Staring hard at the frozen images in the frame, he lifted the rifle slowly to his knees.

And with the greatest of care, Jerome loaded the third and final bullet into the magazine, a small smile playing across his lips for the very first time.



The missing piece of the puzzle was the identity of the murder suspect.

Dammery Mica is a goblin, and, as you will see, he is one tough customer, even for a goblin. Peni Griffin wrote "Tikina-Londi," (November 1989); her new book, OTTO FROM OTHERWHERE, was recently published by Macmillan.

Dammery Mica

By Peni R. Griffin

FORTUNATELY, LONNET HAD tied herself to the saddle horn. The pain of being dragged when the mare changed directions woke her from her walking slumber. Canyon walls cut off the sunlight and loomed close above them. Harvim's unconscious form swayed dangerously on the mare's back as she whinnied and reared against some obstruction in her path.

Lonnet had to swallow twice before she could summon enough moisture to make soothing sounds. The canyon had some remarkable echoes, overlapping each other and distorting until the mare's protests sounded human and mocking. Lonnet clumsily untied herself from the horn.

Someone had dammed the canyon. The quartz-flecked surface of the keystone glittered at her. Shoving her broad-brimmed hat down firmly, Lonnet climbed the canyon wall. She scrambled around the side, the dam being too narrow to sit on securely.

Beyond, the canyon broadened to an almost-valley, mesquite and

creosote clinging to the striated walls above beautiful brown water. No buildings, no fields, no sign of life but a goat drinking opposite. She dipped her hat.

"None of that, now!" snapped the goblin sitting cross-legged on the dam.

Lonnet managed not to drop her hat. The mare snorted and backed, making Harvim wobble.

"Who dares disturb my watering place?" demanded the goblin melodramatically. His hair and beard, bleached almost white, covered all of him except the tip of his nose, and arms and legs like new spring twigs — green, knobby, and thin. Lonnet tried to answer politely, but all that came out was a hoarse breath. The goblin motioned impatiently. "Rinse your mouth, then, but don't swallow any!"

Rescuing Harvim had been easy, compared to letting water into her mouth and spitting it out again. "Lonnet, Patroller of the Dog Town Rangers, sir. My partner —"

"I didn't ask about your partner!" snapped the goblin. "What are you doing at my water hole?"

"Didn't mean to disturb you, sir. This is where the mare brought us. We'll move on as soon as my partner's able."

"Two Rangers, and you had to let the mare find water?" He giggled. "I thought Rangers didn't get lost, Lonnet of the Dog Towns."

"Harvim wouldn't've. It's only my third patrol." She shifted, as if for a secure seat, but really so he could see her scalp belt. She had gotten lucky the second time out, and knew how impressive two scalps were at the waist of someone so green.

"You're in a hard case, Lonnet of the Dog Town Rangers! Why should I help you?"

Almost all the good of rinsing her mouth had gone, but she swallowed cotton and said: "Have you any labor needing doing?"

"Work? What's work?"

"Maybe there's something of mine we could trade."

Lonnet didn't care for the sound of his laugh. "What've you got that's worth a drink for a sick man? I could take all you had for one mouthful, and where would you be?"

Lonnet wondered if she was good enough yet with a throwing knife to take him in the throat at the distance. Then she wondered if it would do

any good — the little buggers were powerful hard to kill. "Come to that, you could let me die, and collect the stuff," she agreed, "but that's a boring way to do business. I got some dice and cards. Whyn't we make a sporting proposition?"

He leaned forward, eyes like malachites glittering suddenly beyond the hair. "Water against what?"

"I got a little cash — knives — tackle —"

He licked his lips. "We just established I could have those anytime I cared to."

Lonnet let herself sag, hoping she looked like she didn't care much anymore. "Suit yourself."

He vanished from the dam and reappeared at her side, still cross-legged. "Craps. Best two out of three. You win, one of you gets a drink."

If she was ever going to gain any ground with him, now was the time. "Hold on, now. Can't game on a dry mouth, and the stakes ain't worth as much if my partner dies. First we all drink, then I set up camp, make Harvim comfortable, rustle up some grub — then we can play."

He thrust his face into hers, smelling of dust and ancient sweat. "I make the rules here, Ranger."

"Mister, the desert makes the rules." The mare was trying to get at the water again. Her echoes had a different, less eerie duality. So he had been laughing at them earlier. "Besides, old mare'll have the dam down if we don't take care of her."

He drew his face back. "Oh, very well!" He vanished.

She watered the mare first, then Harvim. He fluttered his eyelids, groaned, tried to drink more than was good for him, and fell back into a stupor. She had her work cut out for her getting him and the mare past the dam.

One side gorge looked promising for a camp, green with mesquite and cacti, but she had barely begun exploring it, when a scrambling sound made her look up. She had to leap backward to avoid the bundle that thudded to the pale gravel. It was a bobcat, sprawled and limp, its head twisted in an unlikely direction. Lonnet touched the fur gingerly. It was still warm and soft. Somewhere a dove cried out in alarm. Lonnet returned to the main canyon.

The overhang she eventually took for a shelter was a rattlesnake den, but her antisnake charms were in good repair, and they gave her a

stock of fresh meat. She let the mare loose to forage.

Lonnet knew the goblin watched them, and wished Harvim would wake. He'd been ranging for fifteen years, and so far had never not known anything they needed to know. As she worked, she reviewed her little knowledge of goblins. Back in the beginning of things, when the Almighty had gathered his creatures together to determine what their lives would be like, the goblins were the only ones who had asked for exemption from pain, fear, and death. The Almighty had granted them that, at the cost of joy, hope, and birth. Not what she called life, at all, but then, Lonnet belonged to the only race that had refused nothing; whose brief, intense existences ran like wildfire through creation. Eternity sounded unbearably long to her — and she kind of thought the Almighty had expected the goblins to get sick of it, too, and provided them with a way out. She couldn't remember what it might be. She'd missed a deal of practical information, skipping the dull parts of Scripture to get to the dwarf-dragon wars and such exciting stuff.

She cooked her rattlesnake inexpertly, but it tasted good enough to her tight stomach, and the broth she fed Harvim seemed to do him good. By afternoon he had fallen properly asleep in the cool narrowness under the overhang, and she was able to gather wood and set some snares at a little distance from the camp without running back to worry about him every few minutes.

When evening came down, Lonnet ate again and got more broth down Harvim. The stars were emerging before she got her dishes rinsed. Worn out, she leaned against a boulder, watching greenish flame caress mesquite logs. Time to check on Harvim, bank the fire, and —

The goblin was on the other side of the fire. "Craps," he snapped, "best two out of three. I put up water for your partner tomorrow. What's your stake?"

Lonnet blinked at him, feeling stupid and sleepy; but she didn't care to lose the ground she had gained earlier. "Harvim says, never gamble with a man till you know his name."

"I ain't a man. What stake?"

"Same difference." She folded her arms.

The goblin spat. "Dammery Mica's my name, but you can call me sir. What stake?"

Lonnet threw down an empty saddlebag.

"That ain't much against another day of life." Dammery Mica turned it inside out with deft, skinny fingers.

"We may be here awhile," said Lonnet, "and I ain't good at craps."

She proved that before the night was out. The amount of equipment she had to pile up beside the goblin before the sky around the crescent moon turned black was appalling. At last she made the toss that won a day's grace for herself — Harvim and the mare came first, of course — and returned the dice to her pouch. "The bad luck's powerful on your side, Dog Towner," snickered Dammery Mica.

"Skill's what matters to a Ranger," she retorted. "Luck is the servant for the stupid."

She hadn't meant that personally, but she saw at once that he had taken it so. Damn. "Who has luck may have skill, too," he said haughtily. "Wrestling, glovden, King's All — what you will, Ranger, I'll have your all soon enough."

"Then we'll give ourselves variety tomorrow," said Lonnet, banking the fire.

She had wandered off into uneasy dreams before he cleared his winnings away.

Lonnet worked long and hard next day, but at last found leisure to sort the equipment and choose her evening stakes. The number of things they could spare was pitiable. Soon she would have to start staking things they couldn't expect to live without on the journey home. Sighing, she put the scalp belt into the wagering pile. She had held it back last night, on the excuse that it couldn't be useful to Dammery Mica anyway; but he hadn't any use for her money, either, and he'd taken that. The only stake he hadn't liked was her chili peppers. She was wondering just how tough he was, and what it would take to get the upper hand of him, when she heard movement from the overhang. "Harvim?" She hurried over, and found him half out from under. "Lie still, now! You're safe!"

The lines around his eyes deepened as he focused on her. She could tell he was already assessing the situation, from the way his eyes flicked around as she held his head and gave him a drink, but it seemed to be harder for him than usual. "They — they scalped me, didn't they?" he asked, licking stray damp off the beard around his lip.

"Among other things. You'll be fine." He'd be bothered worse if she made him lie down again than if she gave him an idea how they stood.

"They hadn't finished stripping you when I ran off their horses, so we got two of most everything. They got your scalp belt, though. Sorry."

"You — ran off their horses."

"Had to do something." Lonnet felt her face get hot.

"Where's the others?"

"Don't know."

"You telling me the captain called retreat, and you run off their horses instead?"

"Don't pick on me about it, old man. It done you some good."

Harvim grunted, a faint grin tugging the corner of his mouth. "So where are we?"

"Not sure. The mare found us water."

"The mare? We only got one horse?"

"I only got two hands!"

Harvim laughed silently. "Anything to eat?"

Lonnet fed him, noticing the dullness of his eyes and lack of blood under his sunbaked face. Now was not the time to pester him with questions about goblins. She wondered if maybe she'd been so het up about the head wound, she'd neglected the ones from the arrows. If she let them heal over with infection underneath, she would have as good as killed him. She probed the wounds in side and shoulder more carefully than she had in her previous weary cleanings. Sure enough, the shoulder let out pus, and she had to lance it with a hot knife. Harvim gritted his teeth, and fainted. This scared her, but all he said, on coming round, was: "Think I lost a lot of blood. Need some sugar or something."

Lonnet gave him a pile of raisins, prunes, and dried apricots along with a fresh canteen, and went to cut yucca against the chance of fever. She sang as she worked, so Dammery Mica would know he hadn't got her down.

*The Rangers of the Dog Towns,
They very rarely sleep.
They ride and fight and gamble,
But they don't know how to weep.*

This was the night to find out just how tough Dammery Mica was. She was rested, only marginally stiff, and hard living had not had time to wear

her down. If she could ever beat him physically — and without doing that, she didn't see how to strike a good deal with him — it'd have to be tonight.

Harvim dozed and woke, dozed and woke, feverishly, all day. She poulticed him with yucca, wrapped him in both their cloaks, and sat down to await Dammery Mica. A coyote sang from the west of the canyon, and another answered from the east. "Looking for variety, Ranger?" grinned Dammery Mica, long teeth gleaming suddenly from an opening in his beard.

Lonnet picked up her scalp belt. "Seems a shame to risk that at a hand of glove. I thought we might wrestle for it before the light's all gone."

"What use you think I got for such trash?" sneezed Dammery Mica, but he ran a possessive hand over one of the long, straight locks. "I could bet you three times before the sun went down," he said, waving a hand at the vivid western glow.

"We'd have to have rules to make it interesting," said Lonnet. "You couldn't blink in and out, for one thing, or it'd be over in a minute, and what good is that?"

He whined about that, but when she paced out the wrestling ground on the gentlest piece of slope, he hopped to his feet and darted spryly into position in his corner. The first few, testing movements gave her confidence. He was fast, all right, but he seemed more interested in using that speed to stay out of reach than in offense. The high-pitched giggle with which he slipped through her fingers once — twice — three times — irritated her. He tended to leap to the left and up — a lot of bounce in those bony legs — a split second before she made contact. She feinted, brought her legs round where he wouldn't expect them —

One moment she was on the verge of having him down; the next she was sailing through the air to land half in and half out of the water. Dammery Mica's laughter ricocheted off the canyon walls, frightening the desert into silence. Air rushed back into her, replacing the pain, and Lonnet heaved herself to her feet. "N-neat trick," she said, wringing out her tunic.

Dammery Mica stood with his feet apart and his arms akimbo, his head thrown back as he laughed. Lonnet's anger burned her throat as she swallowed it. "Best two out of three, we said."

"So we did!" Dammery Mica rubbed his hands together.

The second bout lasted longer, as Lonnet approached the problem more cautiously. Leverage was her only hope against strength like that, but he was too fast to let her get it. The sunset was a mass of orange, pink, and yellow afterglow when she fetched up in a mesquite against the canyon wall, and crawled out bruised, scratched, and shaken. Dammary Mica aimed his laugh upward, as if to bounce it off the moon. If she had been wearing her weapon belt, she would have thrown her knife, and fortune take the consequences! For a minute she was blind, deaf, and weak-kneed with rage and humiliation; then movement under the overhang brought her attention out of herself again.

Harvim's eyes glittered like a wild thing's, and he was trying to crawl out. A rattlesnake slipped away from the discomfort of his charm as Lonnet went to him. "Lie still!"

He focused on her with effort. "I saw you — he just picked you up —"

"Everything's under control," said Lonnet firmly. "Lie down. Damn you, Harvim! I mean it!" He was groping for his weapon, and his skin burned like rock at noon. She soothed him, got water down him, more yucca packed around him, and left him more or less asleep. Dammary Mica sat by the fire, stroking the deerhide of her scalp belt. His scalp belt. He snickered as she dug the cards out of the remaining saddlebag. "Under control, Ranger?"

"Ever play glovden?" asked Lonnet, shuffling.

"Time or two." He flashed to the opposite side of the rock. "I like King's All better."

Lonnet had no desire to play King's All with a man whose face she couldn't see — bluffing was too important to the outcome. "Let's warm up with glovden. Lady's Maid, or Aces High?"

Dammary Mica whined when the games went her way, and crowed when they went his. At least they did go her way, and in five hands she won three more days of grace. She pushed herself till her fingers could barely hold the cards, and won back the hatchet, the spare bowstrings, and her knife Fledge. Dammary Mica demanded she keep playing, but she put the cards back in her saddlebag and banked the fire, leaving him to chuckle and sort through his winnings while she tried to sleep next to Harvim's restless doze.

* * *

THE FEVER broke in the predawn, and she left him in a deep, natural slumber to hunt. Between weariness, heat, and Dammery Mica, Lonnet was in a foul mood. What happened when she ran out of things to risk, and tried to take water without permission? Was he watching her now, anticipating a long, drawn-out cat-and-mouse game, or was he just planning the most interesting way to murder her? She skinned and jerked her catch with vicious slashes of her blade and sang defiantly.

In early afternoon, Harvim woke, weak but rested, and drank venison broth. She brought him water in her hat, having lost the canteen last night. He sat up, eating and drinking with hands that trembled only slightly. "I had too many dreams last night."

"You do that when you're feverish," said Lonnet.

"It was the same dream, mostly. I was lost in a maze, and you were wrestling with Death. He threw you in those mesquites over there, and you told me everything was under control. So I went on through the maze, and every now and then, I'd come on you and Death again, playing glouden on a boulder."

"It wasn't Death," said Lonnet. "It was a goblin name of Dammery Mica. I'm putting up our equipment against water rights."

Harvim considered this. "How you doing?" he asked, looking at the wet hat. He heard her out gravely, looking older and more tired as she went on. "If he's anything like the goblins my daddy met up in Goblin Mounds, we ain't getting out of here alive. We're too few."

"There must be something we can do."

Harvim gazed at her dully a long moment; then the lines around his eyes twitched, and he managed half a smile. "You just won't let a man lie down, will you, girl? I'd be all peaceful and dead right now, weren't for you!"

Remorse rose to fight anxious ill-temper. "You ain't strong enough for this. Sorry. Let me clean you out again."

Harvim submitted to having his wounds redressed. "The trouble with goblins," he said, "is they live too long and don't got enough to do. Makes them mean. My daddy says one of them that lives in the Goblin Mounds takes critters apart while they're alive just to see how they work. They had a scout there with them, had a big stomach wound, and they was about five Rangers trying to put him back together. This bugger just flashed from rock to rock, gloating that he knew what to do and they

didn't. They don't know what it's like to suffer, so it's mighty funny to them when they see other folks go through it."

"Is it true you can't kill one?" Lonnet helped him back into his shirt.

"Well — what it says in Scripture is, that the Almighty granted them what they asked, but warned them they might not like it. So what he did, he had them each make something with their two hands, and he took the mortal life out of each one and put it in this thing. And they got to keep it near them always, and if ever they get tired of life, they just hit this thing three times, and call out their names with each stroke, and they'll be dead."

"Can anybody do this to them?" asked Lonnet eagerly.

"Anybody as knows the name and finds the thing."

For a glorious moment, Lonnet saw their way out; then her spirits fell. "But he won't've told me his right name, if that's true."

Harvim yawned. "What did he say, exactly?"

"Dammerly Mica's my name, but you can call me sir."

"I bet that means he's got the thing so well hid he don't care if you know his name or not." Harvim picked up the mug of broth, drank a couple of sips, and laid it down again.

"What else did your daddy say about goblins?" pressed Lonnet.

Harvim wrinkled his forehead. "Don't know that they eat. They're fast. They're strong. They don't use no magic, but they got some in their blood. They'll all be snuffed out at the Last Day. That's all I know, hon, honest."

"Go back to sleep, then. I'll do what I can."

If she were a goblin, she thought, sitting down to grind peppers, where in this canyon would she hide her life? Probably it was up the side gorge. If things didn't come to a head tonight, she'd just have to risk Dammerly Mica's wrath and explore there. A vague and desperate plan began to form. She stored some of the chili powder in her tunic pocket.

At dusk she fed Harvim again, and wandered the canyon restlessly. She didn't want to think about the coming night, so she climbed above the dam and scouted the land. Narrow canyon — desert — that might be Cottonwood Butte over there, but it might not. She could see where an old watercourse, murdered by the goblin's dam, wandered off to waste itself in the western flats. They'd have to follow that, trusting the mare and the Almighty.

On her return to the den, Harvim sat up unsteadily. "I think I could sit a horse quite a ways. Whyn't we just light out?"

"You can't travel yet. You know better than that."

"Y'know, I outrank you. I can order you to leave me."

"And I can decide you're feverish and not fit to give orders. We ain't dead yet."

"It's all in the line of duty, anyway." Harvim lay back down. "What do you think of three-handed glovden?"

Lonnet studied him critically. He looked pretty awful. She did, too, by now, most likely. "Maybe one or two."

Dammery Mica materialized at her elbow. "I contracted to play with you, not that old wreck! Where's your dice?"

"You won them last night," said Lonnet crossly. "Let's play glovden."

"King's All."

Lonnet wished she could go to sleep. "Whatever."

By the end of the second hand, she was sure he was cheating, but she couldn't catch him at it. Harvim watched, and dozed, and watched, expressionless. The moon rose, reflecting from white ground and black water. The desert was alive all around them, but the scene was one out of the Deadlands, misshapen by substantial shadows. She could not mistake Dammery Mica for Death, though. Death never cheated, and the goblin must be — somehow — manipulating the cards with swift hands. The cards were his now, won from her ages ago — before the moon rose. If she could just catch him at it — then what?

He consented to Harvim's playing at last, and the hands went fast and furious. They had to invent stakes, risking things they never imagined losing — hats, belts, jerked meat. Dammery Mica chortled as he raked in the remnants of their lives.

A low shape appeared on the dam and curved one end to drink — a bobcat. "Glad to see you don't kill all of them," said Lonnet abstractedly. What in Almighty's name could she stake next? Her britches?

"All what?" asked Dammery Mica, turning his head. With a screech, he vanished, reappearing on top of the beast. In the unreal light, he looked like a puppet, moving jerkily on the stage of the dam against the black backdrop of the lower canyon. "Get off my dam, you stupid brute! Get off!"

"Sure is picky about that dam of his," said Harvim, rubbing his eyes.

Suddenly Lonnet was wide-awake. Of course. She should have seen that at once. That left only one thing to do.

Dammery Mica let the cat run off, and reappeared by the dwindling

fire, grinning from one to the other. "Well? What stake?"

Lonnet stood up, her hands in her tunic pockets, her legs braced apart. "I think it's time we got down to business here."

Fire hissed in wood; an owl called; wind shivered down the canyon. "Ain't that what I said? What stake?"

"Only ever been one stake in this game. It's time to stop piddling it away a piece at a time, and go for broke."

"Lonnet," said Harvim, "you're tired. Whyn't you —"

She cut him off with a motion of her head; to her surprise, he shut up. "I'll wrestle you for my life. You win, I die. I win $\rightarrow$ Harvim and I are rid of you."

Dammery Mica leaned forward. "You can't win."

Lonnet made herself shrug, but did not flatter herself that she looked confident. She was tense to her eyelids.

"What rules do you want to stick on?"

"Harvim calls the start. After that — life and death don't have rules."

Harvim gritted his teeth. She knew what he was thinking, and he was right — but so was she. She needed to do this quickly, before her second wind ran out. "You game or not?" she asked.

Dammery Mica stood and cracked his knuckles. "I'm game. And you're a damn fool."

Lonnet's fist closed tight around the ground chili in her pocket. "I'm ready."

Harvim took forever to count three and clap for the start. She jerked the chili into the air and dove into the water.

Her first good fortune was that she didn't strike her head in that blind dive. Her second was that she hit the dam — rather forcibly — before she had to come up for air. She began attacking the thing on the way up, scrabbling wildly at the mud mortar below the waterline. Someone was howling somewhere when she broke the surface, but she had no time to listen. She gulped air and returned to darkness, finding the keystone by feel.

She stayed down till her lungs burned, and was rewarded by feeling the keystone lurch. This time, when she broke water, the weight of the goblin drove her back down almost at once. With a twist of her body, she banged him against the dam. Retarded by water, it didn't feel like a solid blow to her, but it was enough for the weakened mortar. The dam broke and sent

them tumbling painfully into the lower canyon. Wailing, Dammary Mica let go.

Lonnet had no time to keep track of him, scrambling upon the silt and gravel as the stored water sluiced over her. She hadn't a snowball's chance on the sun of finding the object that held his life, even if it had been where she guessed it was, or recognizing it if she did find it, or breaking it before he broke her, but she shifted rocks and sand with her hands, pounding at large lumps and shouting his name whenever she could without getting a mouthful of water. She was not surprised when his weight drove her facedown in the water. She tried to keep her hands moving as the world roared and blackened around her.

Suddenly the pressure let up, and she reared, gasping. Harvim's breathing was ragged, but he hung on to Dammary Mica's throat like grim death. He was good for maybe two, three seconds in his state. Lonnet fought her way down the creek — reduced now as the reservoir emptied — and felt her hand close on something only slightly like a rock. She picked it up — a crude ceramic figure, vaguely man-shaped, colorless in the moonlight. With a screech, the goblin threw himself upon her. She banged the thing against the canyon wall, screaming even as he choked her: "Dammary Mica! Dammary Mica! Dammary Mica!" She barely heard the last repetition herself.

The figure shattered. Her sight blotted out. The grip on her throat relaxed as a howl of rage and pain bounced off the canyon walls and ran away along the echoes.

It was Harvim who prodded her to her feet. She was too beat-out to care if she lay in the creek with a dead goblin on her back till sunup. Dammary Mica lay where she had shaken him off, his eyeballs glittering in the moonlight, his hair fanning in the current. Lonnet and Harvim helped each other back to the camp.

"You've gone and opened that side wound again," said Lonnet, when she could speak again, "and I bet your fever'll be back tomorrow."

"I bet you'll be too swole up to move," said Harvim.

They stripped off their wet clothes, banked the fire, and rolled together in the cloak Dammary Mica had won from them that night. Lonnet closed her eyes and listened to the water trickle away and the coyotes talking, too tired to sleep. "We'll have to clear him out of the creek tomorrow."

"Have to go looking where he hid our tackle, too."

"I know where to start."

Harvim shivered; Lonnet, almighty cold herself, wrapped him as tight as she could in her arms and thighs. "Lon, honey? Did you really think that was going to work?"

"I didn't think about that." She wondered how much beginner's luck she had left. She was using it up mighty fast. "Did I even get him with the chili powder? I just reckoned he'd land on top of me, and threw it straight up."

"He got some in his eyes. Y'know, I thought you was crazy when you didn't set rules."

"I couldn't've won that fight fair."

He was quiet so long she thought he slept; then he said: "If you'd retreated when you was supposed to, you'd be home right now."

"Shut up and go to sleep," said Lonnet. "You got some getting well to do."

Coming Soon

● **41ST ANNIVERSARY ISSUE** (October): Featuring new fiction by Philip Jose Farmer, Bruce Sterling, Sheri Tepper, Avram Davidson, Mike Resnick, Bradley Denton, Joe Haldeman and others. Watch for the October issue, on sale August 30.

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Now that the latest in business machines is a fixture in most offices (not this one, so please don't fax it to us yet), the time is ripe for an SF extrapolation that nudges the process from the wimpy paper copy to the logical next step . . .

The Fax Man

By Dean Whitlock

JARED TERROL COALESCED into life in the fax booth. He blinked and shook his head, disoriented for a moment by a feeling of *déjà knew*. He knew who he was and where he was and why he was, but he also knew what he wasn't. He wasn't really Jared Terrol. Not *the* Jared Terrol, who was back in his office at World Products Unlimited, Ltd., about to go into a top-level meeting about the acquisition — read takeover — of Lunar Resources, Inc. This Jared Terrol ("Me," he said to himself. "I.") was a fax man.

His mind cleared, and with it, his purpose. Jared Terrol smiled, stretched, and stepped out of the booth, ready to do business. He had three hours before this copy ("Me," he reminded himself) expired. Three hours to get into the meeting with the boys from Western Conglomerates, squeeze them for everything they were worth, and report back. Three hours. Plenty of time for a man like Jared Terrol.

He found his clothes in the changing room outside the booth and

quickly slipped them on. Arriving nude didn't bother Terrol — it was either that or mix his jeans with his molecules — but he hated wasting the time dressing. His secretary had faxed ahead an understated steel-blue jumpsuit and a maroon-on-yellow foulard. Power colors. Terrol checked himself in the mirror and adjusted his tie. He was Terrol completely, in look and feel.

Some people couldn't handle faxing. They couldn't take the concept of a carbon copy working on its own. Or they couldn't deal with dissolving after the three-hour limit. Or they couldn't handle arriving nude. People like that still flew to meetings. They still owned laptop computers. Terrol grinned at his reflection. Laptops were for wimps. He stepped out of the changing room.

Into the middle of a chase scene. Two security guards in Western Conglomerates colors were shouting back and forth, trying to corner a short, fast, and very fat man in a green jumpsuit. The guards had the advantage. The fax booths faced into a broad corridor with a wall at one end and a security gate at the other. The fat man had nowhere to go except around. But he was doing that well. As Terrol stepped into the corridor, the fat man dodged around one guard, bounced off the wall, hip-checked the other guard, and sprinted toward the gate.

"Stand back, sir," one guard yelled to Terrol.

"Stop or I'll shoot," the other yelled at the fat man.

Terrol stepped back into the changing room out of the line of fire. The second guard pulled out a dart gun, dropped to one knee, and fired at the fat man. At the same instant, the fat man dove over the gate. Terrol realized that the man wasn't wearing a green jumpsuit after all. He had green skin. He was a fax, marked with off-color skin so he'd be an obvious copy.

"Hell of a color," Terrol thought, as the fat man flew through the gate like a badly planned genetic experiment. Terrol himself always chose red. Then the dart hit, and the green body splatted against the wall.

"Sorry, sir," a guard said. "Another damn fax ad."

They rushed past him and through the gate. The fat man was flopping on the floor like a half-pithed frog. The first guard to reach him shot another dart into his shoulder, and he subsided.

"He's out," the guard said.

"I'll do him," the second one replied. He pulled a large knife out of his

belt and slit the fat man's throat. The fat man began to soften and then dissolve. Terrol looked away. It was legal to kill a fax, as long as it was done humanely. Still, it wasn't easy to watch.

Just then Terrol heard a door open behind him. He turned back and found himself staring into a pair of beautiful jade-green eyes. In a beautiful jade-green face. Over a very beautiful — and very nude — jade-green body. The woman froze in the doorway to the fax booth, obviously as startled as he was. And Terrol found himself unable to stop staring. She was fine-boned, well-toned, slender, and stacked. And she looked great in green.

They stared at each other for a long time. Finally she blushed (an amazing sight in green) and looked demurely away. She dropped one long-fingered hand to cover her middle.

"Sorry," Terrol said, feeling overwhelmingly unsorry. "Wrong room."

He went out and closed the door. And stood for a moment, regaining his breath. He was glad he'd gotten dressed before she arrived. In his business, it paid to hide your true feelings.

Which brought him back to the present. He checked his watch quickly — fifteen minutes wasted by that damn fax ad. And one hell of a beautiful woman. He wasted another second on her memory, then put it aside and went briskly through the gate. The guards were back in position, and they nodded him by with just a glance at the readout. He ignored them. A robovac was sucking up the remains of the fat man, and Terrol allowed himself a glance at the disappearing mound of green grit.

"Hell of a color," he thought again. Of course, on the right body. . . .

He shook off the memory and strode down the hall to the meeting room. He had no time to waste on a stranger he'd never see again.

He'd been here three times before, in other copies, hammering out the details of the deal he planned to close today. He didn't have those memories, of course, but he had the reports. Besides, they were he, and they did exactly what he would have done to set up this deal.

A deal to buy up a quarter of Western Conglomerates' interest in Solar Systems, Inc.; while three thousand miles away, *the* Jared Terrol inked the deal on Lunar Resources; and over in Hong Kong, still *another* Jared Terrol bought up enough of Sons of Nippon & Sons to give World Products Unlimited so much weight in the low-gravity crystals consortium they could slow the production of di-petroleum carbonate to a standstill. Which

would drive the market price for neotridium, the only substitute, sky-high. And World Products Unlimited, through the clever work of one Jared Terrol and his talented copies, had just bought every neotridium plant on the planet. The world could buy from World Products, or it could go back to oil and coal. It was the sort of deal Terrol loved.

He walked into the meeting room, nodded to the two men already there, took a place at the head of the table, opened the desktop console, keyed up the latest draft of the contract, ordered a drink, made two quick phone calls, bought pork-belly futures, and told an obscene joke. All in flawless rhythm. The Terrol style — set the pace, leave them breathless, shake them up. Whatever you do, don't let them form a complete thought.

"Good morning, Terro —," the older man started.

"It's 4:00 P.M., my time, Junior," Terrol stated, "but thanks for the thought." He let a tight smile flash across his face.

Junior — J. R. Robbins, Jr., now senior partner and chairman of Western Conglomerates — smiled back and opened his mouth to say something else. Terrol turned to the younger man.

"We're off late," he said. "I got held up by a fax ad on the way in." The tone of his voice made statements about the security at Western Conglomerates.

The younger man was J. R. Robbins, III — R-3 to his friends and enemies, Mr. Robbie to the staff. He was vice-chairman and director of operations, and he had no sense of humor. His mouth was still pursed from Terrol's opening joke.

"I'll talk to the Cap —," he started to say.

"No problem," Terrol said. "They trashed him finally. Are we ready to go over this?" He gestured toward his console.

Junior and R-3 glanced at each other. Then R-3 opened his own console and started keying. Junior turned back to Terrol, smiling. He had big ears, big teeth, and thinning hair. A balding monkey, Terrol classed him, and R-3 was a spitting image minus a funny bone.

"We're waiting for someone from corporate legal," Junior said. "To iron out the final word —"

"How long?" Terrol asked. He looked pointedly at his watch.

Just then the door to the meeting room opened. Terrol looked up, and found himself looking into a pair of beautiful jade-green eyes. In a familiar and still-beautiful jade-green face. The body was just as beautiful, too —

only, now it was clothed. The dress, on the other hand, was green and sheer, and it billowed around her as she stopped in the doorway. It was hard to tell where cloth ended and skin began. Terrol's memory filled in the details.

"I will always remember you in doorways," he said, and then realized he had said it aloud.

The woman lowered her eyes and blushed (still an amazing sight), but she smiled also and came into the room. Junior and R-3 looked at her, looked at him, and then at each other.

"Have you two m—," Junior began.

"We passed in the hallway on the way in," Terrol said quickly. He forced his breathing down and put on a poker face. He was again glad to be clothed.

"This is Melony Lane," Junior said. "Melony, Jared Terrol."

She came toward him, hand out.

"Mr. Terrol," she said.

Her voice was sweet and husky, and Terrol found himself standing to take her hand. Then he stopped and sat back down. He never stood to greet people. It gave them an edge. But he looked into her green eyes, and found himself standing back up to take her outstretched hand. He stopped himself again.

And got stuck in a half-crouch with one hand out and one hand groping for the table to steady himself. He took her hand, and felt her long, cool fingers slide against his palm for an instant. Then his other hand landed on the desktop keyboard. The console folded down into the table, taking his thumb with it.

Terrol smothered a cry and jerked upright. The console snapped back open, his thumb came free, and he found himself pressed tightly against Melony Lane, their clasped hands squeezed between her breasts, and his sore thumb hooked in the folds of her sleeve. Her lips parted slightly in surprise, only a breath away from his own. They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment.

Then she made a little "oh" and drew away. Terrol remembered himself and stepped back quickly. The back of his knees hit the edge of his chair, and he sat down hard. His thumb came loose with a little tearing sound. Melony looked down at her suddenly bare arm. Terrol stared at the sleeve in his hand.

World Products has its own agenda. I go where they fax me.

"Are you all ri—," Junior began.

"Of course," Terrol snapped.

"—ght Melony?" Junior finished.

"Why yes, Mr. Robbins," she said. Her voice set Terrol's blood humming.

"Sorry about your dress," he said, trying to decide what to do with the sleeve in his hand. "I'll replace it."

She looked at him and smiled. His blood surged, and he rubbed the cloth between his fingers. He didn't care if he was dressed or not.

"It's all right, Mr. Terrol," she said. "It's just a fax."

Just a fax. His blood slowed at the chilling thought. She was just a fax. The real Melony Lane was somewhere else, probably in a meeting with some other guy (the bastard). He'd have to find out where, find out how to meet her after the meeting, when this beautiful and breathtaking copy unhappily went soft and dissolved. God, what a shame.

Terrol checked his watch again. Another fifteen minutes gone. Fifteen fewer minutes with this lovely lady expired in a cloud of jade-green dust. Then he remembered — he was a fax, too. He had even less time left than she did. And he had a job to do. He dropped the sleeve on the table.

Melony was seating herself between Junior and R-3, directly across the table from him. And Junior was saying something, his monkey face quizzical.

"Your opinions are yours to have, Junior," Terrol said, his usual cover line when he had missed a point, "but World Products has its own agenda."

"You don't like Toledo, then, Mr. Terrol?" Melony asked.

That was it. Junior had said she was from their Toledo office.

"I've never been there. As I said, World Products has its own agenda. I go where they fax me. And please call me Jared." He smiled pleasantly. He tried to smile pleasantly. He made a great effort to smile pleasantly. He had no idea how it actually looked. He had worked hard to perfect his dry, tight power smile, and the habit was hard to break. His face almost cramped from the effort.

Meanwhile, he was thinking about Toledo. He'd have to let Terrol —

the Terrol — know. Maybe *he* could find some way to meet this woman in the real flesh. They could go out for dinner, sip some wine, see a show, go to —

Terrol's heart clenched at the thought. Some other man with Melony Lane — it made him burn with jealousy. ("But *he's* you," a little voice said in his head. "Bullshit," he replied. "I am I, and she is she, and we're both here and now.") Jared Terrol wasn't given to poetry, but that thought seemed like a sonnet. He loved this beautiful woman, and he wanted her. He, not some frigging double three thousand miles away. And her, not a distant twin in Toledo. The real Melony Lane was probably a dull shade of pink, anyway. He wanted the sleek green beauty sitting across the table.

Who, right at this moment, was pressing keys on the desktop, while Junior babbled something beside her.

"Say what?" Terrol said.

"We just need your O.K. to the changes in section 3, paragraph 42, about the —"

"Fine, Junior, fine," Terrol said. He quickly keyed up the section and gave it a quick scan.

"Melony felt the present wording would give you —"

Terrol smiled up at Melony. It was getting easier.

"Excellent wording," he said. "Caught my original intent beautifully. You're a talented piece — uh, person."

She glanced demurely down at her console.

"Now, in paragraph 57 of that section," R-3 said, "Melony thought —"

"I'm sure it's fine," Terrol said. He keyed up the paragraph for a quick scan, but found himself scanning the lines of Melony's face instead as she bent to her work.

"Perhaps you'd like to hear Melony's reasoning behind the new wording," R-3 said. "It has to do with the new regulations on windfall prof—"

"I'd love to hear your reasoning," Terrol said to Melony. "In your own words."

She looked quickly at Junior, who waggled his monkey head.

"By all means, Melony," he said.

"Well," she began, and her voice brought Terrol's pulse up to the red line. He'd love to hear her whisper those words in his ear. Cartel, injunctive procedure, force divestiture — beautiful words in the right mouth.

She stopped and looked at him, and he realized she was waiting for him to comment.

"Beautiful," he said. "Beautiful logic, that is. You won't get any argument from me."

R-3 brought up the next change, and Terrol asked her to explain it for him. And the next one and the next and on down the contract, paragraph by paragraph. Her voice sounded lovelier by the minute. For a brief moment, he wondered if this had all been planned, a trick by Western Conglomerates to distract him from the wording in the contract. Melony could be dosed with pheromones keyed precisely to his glands.

He looked at Junior, grinning like a chimp, and R-3, scowling like a gorilla. And the lovely Melony in the middle, like Sheena of the Jungle. ("Who cares?" he thought. "Life is too short. Love is all that matters.")

And that made him think about the time. He glanced at his watch. Only an hour left. Only an hour more in her presence. He couldn't let it slip by. He had to have her.

He let her finish the current section, and then said:

"I think that's enough. You've done a top-notch job for us, Melony. We can just skim the rest."

She looked puzzled, a delightful tilt of the head, a slight quirk to the green eyes. God, she was beautiful.

"There isn't any more," she said.

"What?" Terrol looked at his console. They were at the bottom of the last page. "Of course," he said. "We can just skim our signatures onto the old page and be done."

"Great," Junior said, rubbing his fat hands together, "just great. It's a pleasure doing business with a man wh—"

"Let's just print and be done with it," Terrol said. He pressed his thumb against the screen next to his name, keyed in the World Products Unlimited, Ltd., authorization code, and closed the console.

"Now—," he began.

"I think this calls for a drink," Junior said. He leaned back in his chair and pressed a key beside his console, letting R-3 sign and seal for Western Conglomerates. "What'll you have, Terrol? Bourbon and branch? Palm wine?" A fully equipped bar rose from the table beside him. "How about you, Melony?" This is your party, too, you know."

"Well," she said. She looked into Terrol's eyes, then looked quickly

away. "Will you be joining us . . . Jared?"

Terrol had been about to refuse. Now he could only nod. He let Junior serve him palm wine, and choked down a sip. Melony took her glass in a slender, well-formed hand and drank delicately. Terrol watched her lips caress the rim of the glass.

He downed his own drink in a quick, sickening gulp and stood.

"I should report back to World Products," he said to Junior. Then he caught Melony's eye. "Time's getting short."

"Certainly, Terrol, certainly," Junior said, bobbing his head happily. He picked up his drink and stood. "You can use this room." He looked at his watch. "We'll make sure everyone stays out until you're . . . uh . . . finished. Come on, Robbie."

R-3 got up with a sour look, leaving his drink untouched on the table. "We have a lounge next door you can use, Ms. Lane," he said.

She rose. "Good-bye . . . Jared," she said.

Terrol smiled at her and nodded. Then he opened the console and pretended to work. He was up and moving as soon as the door shut. He crossed the room in three strides and put his ear to the door, listening.

Then it banged open against his head. Junior peered in, his big eyes beetling in surprise.

"Sorry about that, Terrol," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Terrol hissed, rubbing at the growing bump over his eye. "I just dropped my . . . thing." He pretended to pick something off the floor and put it into his pocket. "Never travel without it," he said, blinking madly to clear his vision.

"I just wanted to say you should help yourself to the bar," Junior said.

"Fine," Terrol said, pushing the door shut on Junior's hands. "Thanks."

Junior yelped and withdrew.

Terrol waited, rubbing his forehead and hoping it wouldn't bruise. God knew what it would look like on his red skin. He needed to look good for the next — he looked at his watch — half hour!

He pulled open the door and sneaked a look down the corridor. To the left, he could see the guards sitting by the gate to the fax booths. They both appeared to be half-asleep. Neither was looking his way, at least. To the right, the corridor ended in an elevator shaft. As he watched, Junior and R-3 stepped in and rose out of sight. There was no sign of Melony. But there was a door between him and the shaft.

Terrol scooted into the corridor and slid down the wall to the door. He listened carefully, but heard nothing. A quick glance behind showed the guards hadn't noticed him. He opened the door and stepped quickly inside.

The room was empty. Terrol cursed and started to turn. Just then he heard a door open behind him. He turned back, smiling.

And found himself staring at a doddering old man in a ridiculous three-piece suit and a Stetson, who stumbled into the room fighting with his zipper. Terrol heard water flushing. Then the man conquered the zipper and looked up with a smile of exultation. He saw Terrol, and the smile stretched into a monkey grin. He came shuffling forward, hand outstretched.

"Pleased to meet you," he said, "pleased to meet you."

"Sorry," Terrol said quickly, backing out of the door, "wrong room."

"J. R. Robbins," the old man said, still coming, "pleased to mee—"

Terrol slammed the door. He heard a thud and a yelp from the other side. But he was already hurrying back the other way, past the meeting room, to the door on the other side. He didn't bother to tiptoe — time was running out — but the guards didn't shift an inch.

He went through the other door without listening. It, too, was empty. But there was another door on the opposite wall. Terrol didn't wait for the inevitable. He ran across the room and yanked the door open.

"Melon—," he said.

A robovac buzzed out. Terrol hopped away, kicking at it and cursing. It followed doggedly, sucking at his shoes with its piggy little nozzle.

"Get away from me," Terrol raged. He brought his foot down on its back with a satisfying crunch. The plastic top cracked, and a cloud of green grit blew out into the room. Terrol's shoe lodged in the plastic, and sparks flew. He leaped away, one foot bare, batting at tiny fires in the hair on his toes. Then he noticed the green grit.

"My God," he said. "Melony." He sank to his knees and reverently touched the little pile. "Oh dear, beautiful Melony."

He heard a door open behind him.

"Oh shit," he muttered.

"Jared," Melony said, "what are you doing here?"

He stood up and turned, trying to smile. His face was sore from too many smiles already. He gave it up and let his face do what it damn well pleased.

She was standing in the doorway, the delightful, quizzical look on her face. He undressed her with his eyes. She flushed and looked away. Her hand went up to her throat.

"Melony," he said, his voice hoarse, "I had to see you."

"Whatever for?" she asked. Her eyes were wide. She was breathing quickly.

He went to her. "Why do you think?" he asked.

"Paragraph 57?" she asked.

"To hell with paragraph 57," he said, taking her hand and drawing her into the room. "To hell with everything." He shut the door and pulled her to him. "I love you, Melony," he said. "I have since I first saw you in the fax booth."

"Oh Jared," she said, pulling away to stand irresolute in the center of the room. The smoking robovac lurched over and blew green dust up her dress.

"You can feel it, too, can't you," Terrol said. He stepped toward her, his hands shaking.

There were spots of forest green on her cheeks. Her nostrils flared. But she turned half away from him.

"Yes," she said, her voice a whisper, "but it's impossible."

"For God's sake, why?" He went to her and took her cheek in his hand. The contrast in skin tones lent a holiday air to their passion. He turned her face toward him. "Why?" he said again. His lips were inches from her own.

"My career," she said weakly.

"You're brilliant," he said. "They wouldn't dare let you go."

"My husband," she said, leaning a hairbreadth closer.

"He doesn't deserve you," he said. Their lips touched. An electric surge passed through his body. The robovac rolled over his bare foot.

He kicked it aside and lifted her into his arms, their lips still pressed.

"I could get pregnant," she said, her voice echoing in his mouth.

Terrol dropped her onto the couch. "For God's sake," he cried holding out his watch. "We're going to dissolve in another ten minutes." He started unfastening her dress.

"It's too sudden," she said, passion written on her face. "I feel so . . . strange. Like a . . . a stranger trapped in a . . . strange body."

"I'm me and you're you and we're both here and now," he panted, the

poet in him bursting forth as he loosened the last seam and tore the fabric from her body. He kissed her savagely and began peeling off his own jumpsuit. He wasted ten seconds on the knot in the tie, and then gave it up. He bent to kiss her again.

When a door opened behind him.

"Hey, hey," a breathless voice chanted. "Have I got a deal for you."

Terrol jerked up and found himself staring into a pair of bloodshot green eyes, in a jowly chartreuse face, over a fat lime Jell-O body. A naked body. A naked, ugly body.

"Greenburg's the name; fax is the game," the fat man said, hopping into the room. "I got booths; I got accessories. I got paper and body toner. I got a service contract you wouldn't believe. Just call 413-672-786-333-8900, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, any language you like; our operators are —"

Terrol rose up with a cry of frustrated rage. He grabbed the fat man by his fat chartreuse neck and began shaking him back and forth. The fat man croaked and jiggled. Then Terrol tripped over the robovac and went down. The fat man tumbled over him and sprawled across Melony. She cried out, suffocating under one Jell-O thigh.

The robovac crawled into Terrol's hands. He scrambled up, brandishing it like a medicine ball, and brought it down on the fat man's head. Then he threw it, sparking and grinding, into the corner. He grabbed the fat man under the arms and hoisted him up with a mighty heave. It was like wrestling with a jellyfish. A jellyfish that softened and turned to powder in his hands.

Terrol stared stupidly at the grit on his fingers. Melony gave a little cry, and he looked down at her. He was panting hard, flushed, aroused.

"Oh Jared," she said, almost swooning. "You're so . . . so . . . red." She held out her arms.

He sank into them, seeking her body with his lips. She pulled his head between her breasts and held him fast. He tried to lift up, tried to slide his legs over her, tried to get into a good position. Any position. But she held him tight.

"Hold me," she said. "I want to remember this moment forever."

And he felt himself start to soften.



FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 42: *In Which It Waddles Like a Duck, Sheds Water Like a Duck, and Goes Steady With Ducks, But Turns Out to be a Tortoise*

“**W**HEN WE were little,” the Mock Turtle went on at last, more calmly, though still sobbing a little now and then, “we went to school in the sea. The master was an old Turtle — we used to call him Tortoise —”

“Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn’t one?” Alice asked.

“We called him Tortoise because he taught us,” said the Mock Turtle angrily. “Really you are very dull!”

Money, as all of you know (and if you don’t, you should), is the least permanent measure of artistic worth the human race has ever devised. Money is usually what employers throw at you, to get you to involve yourself with frivolous or even downright indign projects.

Saul Bellow put it this way: “Writers are not necessarily corrupted by money. They are distracted — diverted to other avenues.”

Once, long ago when I was a little kid, my father and I were walking down Main Street in Painesville, Ohio, and we passed an appliance store that was selling a then-popular, but inferiorly-made television set. There was a line entering the front door; it stretched partway down the block. Those sets were flying out of the store. Now, less than a year earlier, my father had opened his own jewelry store in Painesville, and he also sold small appliances, like tv sets. (This was in the late Forties and tv was quite new; and it was a product that guaranteed big sales; everybody wanted one.) My dad had been offered the exclusive franchise in the area for that brand of tv set, and he had turned it down. The sets were cheesy, and my dad didn’t care to hawk such goods to his neigh-

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bors. But this other store had gone for it, and now I could see they'd made a smart decision. Smart, because the street was filled with people double-parked so they could get in there and plonk down their cash. (It was also a time before credit cards.) So, as we were crossing the street to proceed on our way, not wanting to have to elbow our way through the crowd, I said to my father, "Maybe you shoulda sold those televisions, he looks like he's makin' lots of money."

(We called them "televisions" in those ancient times, the phrase *teevee* had not yet come into common use.)

And my good old pop, who wasn't much of a philosopher, but could turn a cute phrase when he had to, my dear dad looked down at me without a smile and said, very seriously, "He's going to miss seeing the blue skies a lot; but he'll find some pennies."

I hadn't the vaguest idea what he meant by that (we didn't know from Zen sayings in Painesville). So I asked him what he meant by that, and *then* he smiled. "See if you can figure it out," he told me. And we went and had T-bone steaks at Jerry & Bert's. And much later, the light dawned, and I worked it out in my head, and I asked him if I was right, and he kissed me.

What he was saying, of course,

was that the man who owned the store that was selling tv sets that would soon break, and would make the purchasers unhappy, was going to have to walk around town unable to look people in the eye, and he might find some spare change dropped by passersby, but he would have lost everyone's trust.

That was my first really worthwhile lesson in understanding that money is a cheap way to gauge success or ultimate value. Making money is easy. Far easier than demonstrating courage, or being loyal to those who don't reciprocate in kind, or resisting sleaze temptations. Thereafter, I added to that lesson until I had reached a stage of enlightenment where I knew instantly, when I first heard it, that the excuse given for doing lousy but dollar-heavy work, "He's laughing all the way to the bank," was thoroughly ethically corrupt.

I suppose I've gulled myself occasionally, as have we all, into taking on a job that was beneath me, because it promised big bucks; but I like to think that, for good or ill careerwise, I've always done what I thought was artistically *and* ethically correct. For instance (and I cast no judgment on those who've done otherwise), I find it no trouble at all to reject blandishments to write stories for those "sharecropper books" based on other writers'

concepts or previously published works. There's a lot of money to be made there, but I'd miss a lot of blue sky and wind up only with dropped pennies.

Believing this, I take enormous reassurance from the every once in a while success of some writer or artist or explorer or corporation that eschews the fast bankroll and its accompanying trashy job, but rather sticks with some pet project or whacky idea . . . and succeeds right through the roof.

Which brings me to TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES (New Line Cinema) which, as of the middle of May, had made not only \$109,585,273.77 and millions of kids goofily happy, having cost a reputed mere 12 million to make, but had borne out the anti-American viewpoint expressed above.

You see, there were these two young guys barely out of their teens, name of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, from Sharon, Connecticut, and they . . .

But wait; I get ahead of myself.

Because it's not a review of this film that's important. The story is a charmingly silly, latter-day Aesop's fable about a quartet of teenage mutant ninja turtles, just as the title says, and about whom you've already heard a great deal (perhaps too much, if you have little kids around the manse). That they are

omnipresent, literally in your breakfast cereal, is not really important, either: because soon enough the fad will burn itself down to a charming, silly, warmly nostalgic ember and continue to make money for a great many people — but now which way the kind of megabucks it's minting currently — and *money* as the yardstick of intrinsic merit will become unimportant, too. Even for the ones who admire those who laugh all the way to the banks.

What is important, in my view, is TMNT as a manifestation of human endeavor. (Oh, no, is he going to do one of those riffs!! Lawd spare me!!)

Yet hold, I say. I do pace before mine own self.

Here's where your faithful columnist's diverse knowledge of many literary subcultures redounds to your benefit. Because, to understand at the highest level the wonder, nay the grandeur, of TMNT and their creators, and their success, you must let me take you gently by the hand and lead you back through the mist of particulate matter that is Time . . .

It begins with the legendary Stan Lee of Marvel Comics. And the year is 1964, the month is April. And Stan Lee has created (and Bill Everett has drawn, and Sam Rosen has lettered) the first issue of a new comic book for Olympia Publica-

tions (which was what Marvel was called before it officially became Marvel Comics) called *Daredevil*, *The Man Without Fear*!

It was a comic that told the story of young Matt Murdock, a teen-ager who, returning one day from studying at the library, sees a blind man crossing the street, unaware that he is about to be run down by a truck. On page 9 of that first issue of *Daredevil* we see that the big red truck hurtling toward the old man bears the legend AJAX ATOMIC LABS

RADIO-ACTIVE MATERIALS
DANGER

"Without a moment's hesitation . . . his supple muscles responding to the emergency with the speed of thought . . . Matt Murdock hurtles toward the scene of impending disaster . . ."

He won't have a chance . . . unless I can reach him in time!

"The swift-moving teen-ager hurls the unsuspecting blind man out of the truck's path . . . but he himself is not so fortunate . . ."

Ohhh . . .

And in the next panel we can see the top of the Ajax truck in the background; and in the foreground a crowd of lookie-loos, and a cop, staring down at something on the street, something we cannot see; and they are saying:

"He saved that man's life!"

"Most heroic act I've ever seen!"

"Don't just *stand* there! Someone call an *ambulance*!"

And (pay close attention):

"But a cylinder fell from the truck . . . it struck his face! Is . . . is it something *radioactive*?!"

Well, Matt recovers, though he's blind; and he goes on to become Daredevil, this incredible crime-fighter who, though he's blind — which the underworld does not suspect, of course — has developed heightened sensory powers because he was conked in the head by a canister of "something *radioactive*!"

And that's where we take leave of Stan Lee and his creation. But right there, in panel four of page 9 of that now-valuable comic book, we begin the trail of wonder and grandeur that has allowed Eastman and Laird to purchase the entire state of Connecticut, while buying Maine and Rhode Island for their mothers.

(And I'll thank you not to ask how a cylinder of unspecified radioactive material being improbably schlepped through the middle of a city during rush hour in a vehicle that looks like a moving van could have bounced out of said sealed vehicle and caromed *forward* in defiance of the laws of gravity, as well as action/reaction, and hit a kid in *front* of the vehicle, and cause him not only to go blind but

to develop a "radar sense." This was written in a more innocent time and Stan Lee will have to explain it all, no doubt, before the Pearly Gates.)

We move forward in Time. It is 1975, and my pal Len Wein, the well-known Jewish comic book writer (and currently *macher-in-chief* at Disney Comics), is working for Marvel. He revivifies a superhero group that Lee had originated years before, but that Marvel had put on hiatus: *The Uncanny X-Men*. (A name that always pissed me off, seeing as how one of the X-Men in the original team was Jean Grey, Marvel Girl, who subsequently became Phoenix; and at various times the cadre has included such females as Rogue, Psylocke, Storm, Dazzler and Shadow-cat.)

He does such a great job of re-inventing The X-Men that, after he's moved on to another company, Chris Claremont comes to the project and makes The X-Men the top selling comic in America, spinning off such mutant teams as Excalibur, X-Factor, New Mutants, Alpha Flight, Power Pack, X-Terminators and a plethora of mini-series and single-character magazines that virtually crowd everything else off the stands. The craze for teenage mutant superjocks is so hysterical that by the summer of 1983 Wolverine and Nightcrawler

are so successful that they make Superman and Batman look like a pair of old farts.

And in that summer, having left his mark on *Daredevil* over at Marvel, Frank Miller moves over to another comic company and creates a groundbreaking mini-series titled *Ronin*, which combines science fiction with the wildly exotic world of ninjas, samurai warriors, martial arts, ritual violence and Japanese culture. It is too offbeat and intellectual to be the popular money-making success Miller will later bring forth when he conceptualizes Batman as over-the-hill in *The Dark Knight Returns* (which leads directly to the tone and look of the *Batman* movie); but *Ronin* is clearly operating at such an elevated level of craft and erudition that it becomes the talk of the industry.

It strikes a spark that such previous forays into martial arts comics as *Master of Kung Fu* or *Richard Dragon* had been unable to generate. It throws wide the door for other Eastern-influenced comics, *manga*, and outright imitations.

Miller's ninja assassin work on *Daredevil*, and *Ronin*, has made him the hottest artist/writer in the game, and anything he touches becomes collectable. He is suddenly the success icon for all struggling comics wannabes, the envy of most comics professionals sweating their

butts off in the work-for-hire talent graveyard, and the sour grapes target for self-styled analysts of the medium who equate popular success with sellout, regardless of the facts. But at whatever intensity, what Miller has done, and the way he's done it, becomes mythic.

Among those lusting for acceptance are Kevin B. Eastman and Peter A. Laird. As a parody, they devise a silly plot that melds the teenage mutant superhero craze with the passion for Miller-influenced samurai stories, and for chuckles they plant the in-group joke of using the radioactive cylinder that had blinded Matt Murdock and created Daredevil more than twenty years earlier.

What if — they suggested, puckishly — that radioactive canister bonked Matt in the head, kept going, rolled into the gutter, fell into the sewer system, and contaminated four baby turtles someone had flushed? What if those turtles became (stupidest idea ever conceived, no one'll ever go for it, don't be ridic —) Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles???

They took the idea to then-editor of Marvel Comics, Jim Shooter, and they floated it toward him. With the sort of incisive judgment-making ability, insight, foresight and just pudding-plain human kindness that marked

Shooter's tenure as Marvel's gray eminence, he rejected it, and them, with the now-legendary dictum, "Too amateurish."

This canny demonstration of business acumen is now almost universally considered to be right up there at the tippy-top for bold executive thinking with that of the guy at M&M candy who refused to let Spielberg use them things what melt in your mouth and not your hand as an element in *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*, thereby forcing the filmmaker to substitute Reese's Pieces.

And in April of 1984, determined to ignore invitations from the mainstream comics companies to hire on as beanfield hands doing scutwork on corporate-owned properties, Eastman and Laird formed Mirage Studios and self-published the first issue of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, a black and white comic with a two-color cover and a puny press run of 3000 copies. The second printing was in June: 6000 copies. And the third was in February of 1985: 35,000 copies. To date, that first issue has been reprinted at least six times, with sales in the hundreds of thousands, if not more than a million. It was the phenomenon that, in the words of industry-authorities Don and Maggie Thompson, "fueled the blaze of interest in independent comics."

It has been six years since Eastman and Laird had their little in-joke, Mirage Studios has licensed TMNT to everyone in the known universe, through Surge Licensing, Inc.; in September a 1.3 million dollar "Live Arena Show" will visit every major city in America backed by major sponsors; thirteen half-hours of the new TMNT Saturday morning animated series will air on CBS; and the live-action motion picture has been #1 at the boxoffice for seven weeks.

If you go to one of the many direct-sales comics shops in your area, and you want to buy a copy of that first issue of the comic, you will pay in excess of \$160.

And if you don't think that Eastman and Laird's creation is a singular wonder, *sui generis* in terms of public acceptance, then consider these two incidentals: first, according to *The New York Times*, merchandising of *Batman* is more than \$500 million, but merchandising of TMNT has exceeded \$650 million. And second, in the wake of the instant success of TMNT, a rash of imitations broke out on the body of the comics:

Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters; *Cold Blooded Chameleon Commandos* ("featuring genetic mutation at its best"); *Mutant Ninja Mutants*; Don Simpson's *The Uncategorizable X-*

Thems; *Pre-Teen Dirty-Gene Kung-Fu Kangaroos*; and an item originally announced by "The House of Ideas", Marvel Comics, as *Adult Thermonuclear Samurai Elephants*. Coming only a tad late to the picnic, Marvel at least had the acumen to kill the comic just as all the others were failing dismally. It appeared in September of last year as a one-shot: *Power Pachyderms*.

The only survivor, having created and filled its own category, was TMNT. Leading to the five-part TMNT animated cartoon mini-series done for syndication in 1987 by Murakami Wolf Swenson, Inc. As written brilliantly by David Wise and Patti Howeth (who wrote all five parts between April and June of that year, for a mere \$45,000) the series served as pilot for the syndicated series, for which Wise has written more than thirty episodes.

The animated series, and the deluge of licensed products from quartz digital watches and skateboards, lunch boxes and canned pasta for Chef Boy-Ar-Dee, children's swimwear and wallpaper borders, to greeting cards and Nintendo videogame cartridges, and the millions upon millions that have been raked in by Burger King promotions . . . did not pass unnoticed by Golden Harvest, the Hong Kong-based film company

helmed by Run Run Shaw and best known for its kung-fu money-makers, notably those that brought Bruce Lee to international prominence.

And so it came to pass that an in-joke about a lost canister of radioactive material from a comic book more than a quarter of a century old, a desire to pay homage to (and cash in on) the innovative work of yet another comic book visionary, an insulting and peremptory dismissal of anxious young amateurs by an arrogant business executive, and the awesome stick-to-it-iveness of two feisty kids, has reached its most successful road marker to date with the arrival of a PG-rated, 93-minute running time full-length live-action translation of the dopiest idea for a film since *Howard the Duck*.

And its success in terms of that cheapest commodity, money, would not mean a thing had this movie turned out as suddenly as *Howard*. But the demented clarity of the Eastman and Laird original idea has been captured so expeditiously; and the movie is so damnably pleasant; and the tone is so dreamily reminiscent of the kind of stuff Jay Ward did with *Rocky and Bullwinkle* and *Tom Slick* and *George of the Jungle* and *Mr. Peabody and Dudley Do-Right*; and the mix of juvenilia with adult-pleasing references is so sure-footed; that *Teenage Mutant Ninja*

Turtles turns out to be one of the surprise treasures of a season of sf/fantasy films most notable for their idiocy and amateurishness.

After *Howard*, we had no right to expect something this scintillant. The duck came out of the production waters as sticky and lugubrious as something left in the wake of the Exxon Valdez. It was a disaster of teeth-grinding awfulness.

Why does TMNT work, where *Howard the Duck* didn't?

They're both ideas for films that any production exec capable of human speech should have laughed out of his/her office. They're both translation-dangerous, considering that what works in a comic book most often doesn't work up there in live action. They're both dependant on a degree of audience disbelief-suspension that demands utter confidence and clear thinking on the part of the creative team. They're both very expensive to mount properly.

But *Howard* was universally despised, an unregenerate failure, embarrassing even the talented creator of the quacker, Steve Gerber; and *Turtles* has charmed damned nearly everyone, even rating three out of four stars from *USA Today* with this sally at making the movie critic-proof:

"Of course, those who insist on acting their age instead of their

shoe size might not appreciate four adolescent terrapins who camp out in a sewer, chow down on massive doses of pizza and pal around with a giant rodent who talks in fortune-cookie proverbs. Go rent a Bergman film and let us kids enjoy these reptilian warriors."

Why should this be, that one quacks and the other causes quakes? Well, the Todd Langen-Bobby Herbeck screenplay is smart and sweet and goodhearted, and there is an unabashed insouciance to it, a smartass hipness absolutely devoid of embarrassment, that allows us to feel free to let go and be silly along with the charming animatronic characters created by the late Jim Henson's Creature Shop. The production is top of the line, and you cannot locate anything cheesy, no matter how beadily-eyed you scrutinize any corner of any single frame. Steve Barron has directed as seriously and defiantly, without artistic excess or cultural cringe, as if he were shooting *Gandhi* or *Glory*. The actors all assay their parts with verve and bemused dedication (and none will ever have to delete this credit from their *vitae* out of chagrin); and the two major human characters — Judith Hoag as the newscaster April O'Neil, Elias Koteas as the macho vigilante Casey Jones [whose free-for-all battle with Raphael in Central Park is a ring-

tailed doozy] — are splendid, holding their own and better, in no way upstaged by four martial arts savants in full turtle regalia. Add that one to the warning about never playing opposite children or dogs.

Or it could be that the film is full of the most wonderful puns . . . and you know how I hate puns. Or that the Henson Muppet of the *sensei*, Splinter, is simply amazing; capable of a range of facial expressions that soon divest your attention of the impossibility that what we're seeing is a talking rat. Or that there are conscious attempts on the part of the makers to pique your fondest memories: when we see the kid-corrupting environment that the evil Foot clan has shaped for its little street thugs, we are surely and smartly put in mind of the Pleasure Island sequences in *Pinocchio*; when we see dear good Splinter wired up to chain-link, we are gently put in mind — with no *frisson* of blasphemy — of the Crucifixion. The only *unreal* thing in the film is that the heroes find a parking space without difficulty in the streets of New York.

From time to time you ask me to tell you how such and such a film came to exist, what was the process that made them make *this* one and not *that* one, why this one works and that one sucks. In the progress of TMNT from comic book

idea based on affectionate parody, through its separate existence as a mind-croggling moneymaking machine in the world of product licensing, to its adoption based on greed for the small screen, to its reception as a commodity that could support a feature-length motion picture, it has not been altered. It is the same simple, goofy concept that Eastman and Laird cobbled up out of innocent affection for comics.

It is, I submit, the purity of the innocence of childhood that flows through this film. A purity that

none of the Spielberg films, with the exception of *E.T.*, can touch.

And it demonstrates that though it can pick up all the pennies off all the sidewalks of the world, it is the illogical determination of its creators to have their whack at the plate, knowing that there is scant possibility they'll be making any laughing trips to the bank, that has been the power behind TMNT's success.

These sliders and snappers can look anyone in the eye, and grin. We call them Tortoise, because they taught us."



Hume

"Oh, the hat — it's my birthday, sir, and the kitchen staff is giving me a little party."

MASTER OF THE HOUSE

By Paul Cook



HE ANTIQUE SPRING BELL
to the front door of Willow
House ripped Big Bill Nyland

clean out of his reverie over the *Atlanta Constitution's* sports section. It was early still; Emma Beauchamp, their ersatz maid and cook, had been the only other resident up and about at that hour, preparing breakfast for the rest of the House.

Nyland lowered the paper. "What now?" he said from the only chair that would support him in the spacious sitting room of the antebellum mansion. Roger Maris of the New York Yankees had been lately hounding Babe Ruth's home-run record, and even though Maris would never achieve it, Big Bill still found the gentlemanly pursuit of such matters exciting. The Yankees played on real grass, manicured and soft — grass that suggested Eden and dreams of a terrible future postponed.

There was nothing in the *Constitution* of a war brewing in Indochina or of a mutagen virus being passed among profligate green monkeys in

west-central Africa. In fact, there was nothing in the paper about the future at all.

Which was fine with Big Bill Nyland. That's why he had chosen 1958. It was safe . . . all things considered.

He heard Mrs. Beauchamp answer the door, heard a muffled exchange of voices in the foyer, and wondered distantly who it could possibly have been — unless it was trouble. For no one came to Marietta, Georgia, especially to Willow House, on a Sunday morning in sleepy 1958 unless it was trouble. The de Varnier Institute far Upstream had certain procedures it adhered to rather ruthlessly concerning Arrivals, and it never followed them on Sunday. At least not since Big Bill had been Housemaster there.

Emma appeared at the wide entrance to the sitting room. Her deep brown eyes made a sideways cast in the direction of the foyer.

"Bill," she said. "There's . . . someone at the door. He asked for you specifically."

Big Bill looked at her above the reading glasses he wore to fool any of the locals who might happen to drop by. As a genetically bred powerhouse, he needed some sort of disguise — even at Willow House. Glasses and a shambling gait usually did the trick.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. He wouldn't say." She seemed nervous, and that was not a good sign. He knew her too well.

Someone coughed in one of the rooms above them. Big Bill said, "That sounds like Susan. You go on. I'll see who it is."

"Bill, he looks like an Arrival. I don't know if I can handle an Arrival . . . not today," she declared, retreating into the kitchen, where she had a breakfast tray prepared for Susan Cresti, the woman who had coughed upstairs.

Big Bill hefted his six-foot-seven, 220-pound frame from his chair. "Good grief," he muttered to himself. "This is *all* we need."

He entered the foyer and loomed before the screen door, which had been left open to let the cool June morning air inside.

Framed beyond the door was the fuzzy silhouette of a rather smallish man with a suitcase. He had been staring out at the secluded neighborhood and the taxi that had evidently brought him here.

A taxi. He came here by taxi! Bill Big felt a sickening twist of alarm in the pit of his stomach.

"Hello," Big Bill said.

"Are you Dr. Nyland?" the man with the suitcase asked, turning around. He consulted a piece of paper, obviously a set of directions on how to get to Willow House.

The taxi driver yawned and waved at them before drifting on up the quiet lane back to Atlanta.

"Call me Bill," Big Bill said, trying to sound casual. He held open the door for the newcomer. "Come on in."

Surreptitiously, he scanned the street. Willow House was at the end of a lonely lane of spruces and hickories, once part of an old plantation in what would — twenty-five years hence — become a quiet northwest Atlanta suburb. Even so, it still wouldn't do to arouse local suspicion. Big Bill had slipped up more than once lately, and he didn't want to risk the wrath of the institute by doing it again. He rather liked his job.

Guardedly, the stranger stepped into the foyer. At the top of the stairs, Emma Beauchamp paused to get a better glimpse of him.

"My name is Hastings," he said. "Pierce Hastings."

The man's only possession was a real-leather suitcase, *de rigueur* for travelers to the twentieth century. He wore tan cotton trousers, a blue sport shirt, and a light-gray cardigan sweater. His apparel fit the decade, if not the season. The sweater was a bit much. However, the de Varnier Institute would rather err on the side of eccentricity than strain the boundaries of the de Varnier effect — to say nothing of inciting curiosity in the minds of the residents of Marietta. He *fit*. That was all that mattered.

Yet, as Big Bill observed, the man did not seem to fit Willow House specifically: he seemed far too healthy. His hair, blonde and neatly combed, was not deracinated by chemotherapy drugs; his skin appeared ruddy and hale. He walked without faltering; he breathed as easily as someone who might have taken a stroll to the grocery store and back.

And he had come here by taxi! Big Bill reminded himself. Already the man had mingled with the native population. . . .

"Welcome to Willow House," Big Bill said. "Hope you had a pleasant trip to Marietta."

"Considering why I'm here," Pierce Hastings said, "I guess it was all right."

Big Bill didn't like the sound of *that*.

Upstairs the oakwood floor complained as someone moved hesitatingly about. Very few tenants of Willow House got up before ten o'clock, regardless of the day. Fewer still *ever* got up.

Nyland cocked an ear to the bedroom just above him. He recognized Emma Beauchamp's soft tread as she attended to Dr. Susan Cresti.

Had the institute *known* that Susan Cresti would be leaving Willow House that very day? Had they learned how to pinpoint someone Downstream to the exact hour?

"Let's step in here," Big Bill offered, leveling a massive arm toward the sunlit sitting room.

Pierce Hastings casually stepped into the large, airy sitting room, a room with chairs for a dozen people, with magazines by the score on end tables and the one large pink marble coffee table. He set down his suitcase and, without Big Bill's asking, withdrew a medallion from beneath his shirt. It resembled an ordinary Saint Christopher medal: oval-shaped, the size of a dime, it was as innocuous as any medallion in the real world could be.

"They told me you'd want to see my nexus alarm first," he said. "Here."

Nyland gave it a mere glance. He wasn't so much interested in the medallion as he was in the man who wore it. "Looks fine to me," he said.

Hastings's alarm, sensitive to the convergence of any nearby de Varnier points, was embedded in a microchip on the back of a Saint Christopher medal. Though Atlanta might have been relatively uneventful in 1958, all travelers still had to be cognizant of any important nexuses that might be converging nearby. Though the past was able to tolerate visitors from the future, there were certain lines that King Kronos would not allow to be crossed, certain barriers that protected vital junctures in history, whether they be people, places, or things.

That's why they had situated Willow House far from Atlanta, where the Terminals of the twenty-first century would not be exposed to de Varnier nexuses of any kind. Magazines, radio, and television, primitive as they were, were enough for the folks of Willow House.

"Have you eaten?" Big Bill asked. He had heard Emma Beauchamp coming down the stairs.

"No," Hastings said. "I'm not hungry. Thanks."

"The others will be getting breakfast soon. How about some coffee? It's the real thing."

The faint, scratchy croon of a woman's plaintive voice came down from Susan Cresti's room. She had put a record on her hi-fi and played it low. Patsy Cline was her perennial favorite.

"No, thanks," Pierce Hastings said.

He turned to the window that faced the street and the wide pasture beyond. The nearest house — a small farm, actually — was several hundred yards to the east, just as the institute preferred.

Emma Beauchamp returned with the empty tray.

"We'll just have coffee, Emma," Big Bill said.

"Will the gentleman be having breakfast?"

"No," Pierce Hastings said rather brusquely.

Emma Beauchamp knew her place in the household, but it wasn't that of a mere servant. She stood her ground.

"If they downloaded you in real time, then you *missed* your breakfast, and that's a fact."

Hastings turned. "I said I wasn't hungry."

"No need to snap," the woman replied. "A body could use a good breakfast. 'Specially round here." Emma Beauchamp withdrew to the kitchen. The music continued softly from above.

"She's black," Hastings said, staring fixedly at Big Bill.

"I know that," Big Bill said.

"They didn't tell me you had black servants here."

"She's an intern, not a servant," Nyland said. "She's here for training. We get locals dropping by every so often. It pays to look like we fit in around here."

"I won't have a black woman serving me," the new man said brusquely. "That's all."

NYLAND HAD seen this sort of reaction before. It might have been the shock of the trip Downstream. He had even suffered it himself — the disorientation, the absolute *strangeness* of arriving in far earlier era, an era in which one clearly did not belong.

However, there was something peculiar about this Pierce Hastings. Big Bill couldn't quite place it, though his heightened instincts fairly jangled in his mind.

"I need to see your profile," Big Bill said. "We weren't expecting you, and the institute sent nothing ahead."

Hastings made a disinterested gesture with his hand and seemingly pulled a plastic clipboard right out of nowhere. It had been tucked away unseen in the man's personal subdimensional space. Nyland guessed his other effects were there as well: the suitcase he carried had been only for show.

Big Bill studied the biosheet as Hastings continued to ponder the odd world beyond the window — the starlings, chittering in the hickories, the cool June morning. Those things alone would be strange enough for an individual from the late twenty-first century, where June wasn't quite June, and there were no starlings.

Still, the man before him and the man the biosheet described seemingly did not match. Yet if the diagnosis *was* correct, then Pierce Hastings certainly *did* belong in Willow House.

The sheet described Pierce Hastings — like the other Terminal cases of Willow House — as an individual of great scientific achievement, a botanist from the University of Chicago. However, the man had fallen victim to one of the many genetic nightmares loose in his century and was considered Terminal. That's why he had been sent to Willow House.

What bothered Big Bill was that Pierce Hastings did not in the least look the part. And no Arrival to Willow House had ever taken a taxi from the Gate, which was hidden on a farm outside of Marietta a few miles to the west where the hills of Appalachia became the mountains of Tennessee.

"How did it happen?" Big Bill asked, returning the clipboard to him.

Hastings shrugged and dropped it back into its subdimension. "Kennedy thought it'd be a good idea to send a U.N. team into the Congo dunes to see if we could regenerate the rain forest, now that the war's over."

"I didn't know the war was over," Big Bill remarked.

"It is now," Hastings said. "But the Afrikaners saturated the relief centers and shanty towns with tactical multipurpose viruses. Our whole team got one or the other of them."

He did not elaborate further. Big Bill could figure it out. The other members of Hastings's team were either already dead, or they were somewhere Downstream in a halfway house similar to Willow House, waiting to die.

From what the sheet said, Pierce Hastings had no more than six weeks to live before every cell in his body would dissolve in one violent spasm.

The horror Hastings had contracted was a bioengineered nanobot, self-replicating and terribly efficient, which had only one function: to seek out RNA replicators in bone-marrow mitochondria, and change the bonding message for cell-wall elasticity. They rewrote the cytoplasmic code so that new cells would have a self-destruct program in them. The nanobots also had an ingenious dormancy program so that they could hide from macrophages or other nanobots the doctors Upstream used to combat Hastings's horror. What Hastings had in his body was a factory that produced little kamikaze pilots. The factory would shut down only when *he* shut down.

Big Bill had seen something like this before in other patients who had long since left Willow House. If the biosheet was true, then Hastings was literally dissolving. It would not be a pleasant death — either to watch or to endure.

Still, Hastings could not have come at a more inopportune time. What made Big Bill uneasier still was that usually they had some sort of warning. The institute had very strict rules governing Stream travel. Arrivals had a whole set concerning them, and so far, with Hastings, the institute had not followed a single one.

This left the Master of Willow House *very* uneasy.

UPSTAIRS SOMEONE sloshed around in a bathtub. That could only be Phil Kramer, Bill realized. The brilliant physicist always indulged himself with a morning bath, being one of the few denizens of Willow House who could make it to the bathroom on his own.

Emma opened the double doors to the main dining area. Only five places had been set at the table, since most of the tenants of Willow House were unable to leave their beds.

Emma Beauchamp crossed her arms. "You better eat before it gets cold," she announced. "Unless it's not to your liking," she said to the new man.

"What is it?" he asked, staring at the food on the table.

"Eggs, bacon, orange juice, and coffee. If you don't like it, tell me what you do eat, and I'll fix it. What I don't have in the kitchen, I've got in my personal space."

Pierce Hastings stared at the table, and Big Bill watched the man's reaction. There was more cholesterol and animal fat there than an individ-

ual should consume in a lifetime, let alone in one meal. As Housemaster, though, Big Bill did what he could to make life easy for his Terminals. Every meal was a last meal, and every tenant deserved the best.

Hastings circled the table like an animal approaching a suspect carcass.

Emma edged up to Big Bill. "You know what this is all about?" she whispered.

"Haven't a clue," he told her. "You go and see to Susan. And tell Phil we've got a new man."

Mrs. Beauchamp nodded, then left.

Upstairs the doleful sounds from the antiquated phonograph flowed down the stairs like a melodious brook. Hastings's pale blue eyes scanned the ceiling at the source of music.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Susan Cresti," Big Bill said. "She's one of our tenants."

"I mean the music," he said rather irritably.

"Patsy Cline." When he saw that the name did not register, Big Bill elaborated. "She's a country singer. Susan chose Willow House because of her. She also likes Elvis, but he's in West Germany right now. A month ago we went to Graceland —"

Big Bill suddenly halted his dissertation. Outgoing as he was, something inside told him that it might not do to discuss his "outings." Field trips away from the House were highly frowned upon by the de Varnier people far Upstream, and more than one Housemaster had lost his job because of them.

However, from Hastings's expression, it appeared that he did not know anything at all about Graceland or who Elvis Presley was. In fact, Hastings appeared not to have even recognized Susan Cresti's name. Nearly everyone Upstream knew about the physicist who had located all the "hidden" mass of the universe. It had scored her a Nobel Prize. Unfortunately, an irresponsible lover's kiss in The Hague a month later had infected her with the newly discovered HIV-4 virus that had been rampaging throughout Western Europe at the time. Six months after that, Susan Cresti became a boarder at Willow House.

The new Arrival returned his attention to the breakfast table. Big Bill watched him closely.

"How can you stand it here?"

"It has its moments. You get used to it." At that point, Phil Kramer hobbled down the stairs in bathrobe and slippers, fresh from his bath. He used a gold-crowned cane for support. By the look on Phil's face, Big Bill could see that Emma had warned him of their new Arrival. What hair he had left on his head was barely dry.

"Phil," Big Bill introduced. "This is Pierce Hastings. Dr. Hastings has just Arrived." To Hastings, he said, "This is Dr. Philip Kramer. He worked with Jean de Varnier at the institute."

Dr. Philip Kramer had been a gregarious sort before his unstoppable cancers began pillaging his liver and kidneys. Still, he managed to appear rather poised, leaning on his cane with an aristocratic flair.

He shook the new man's hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said in his usual early-morning voice, froggy and deep.

However, Phil Kramer also knew something of Stream protocol, and an unannounced arrival of *anybody* was cause for concern — especially when all they were expecting that day was a Departure. A Departure was enough for them to deal with; an Arrival only complicated matters.

Unless the institute was up to something, Bill reminded himself. And he knew that Phil had seen it, too.

"Are you in trouble again, or what?" he said as he passed Bill on his way to his usual place at the table.

The new man looked at Phil Kramer's blotchy face, then up at the redheaded giant who ran Willow House.

"What trouble?" he asked.

"Nothing," Big Bill said. He reached for the coffeepot and poured a steaming mug for the dying mathematician. "Here, Phil. Have some coffee."

He felt like pouring it over his friend's head.

Big Bill set the coffeepot down and faced Hastings.

"I'll be honest with you, Pierce. This is an awkward time for us," Big Bill explained. "We weren't told you were coming, and we have a small . . . duty to perform today. A sad one, I'm afraid."

Phil Kramer began helping himself to what little eggs and bacon his appetite would allow. His eyes were glazed with their characteristic endorphin shine — product of his morning pain pills.

"This is Susan Cresti's last day at Willow House," Bill went on. "We're driving her to the hospice in Atlanta. You're welcome here, of course, but

it will take Emma awhile to get a room ready for you. Usually the institute warns us —"

"It was the only time they had open," Hastings replied.

Phil Kramer looked up from his plate. "What about the other eleven Houses?"

"It was either '58 in Georgia or Seattle in 1893. All the other Houses are full."

"Down to the Oligocene?" Phil asked.

Hastings nodded tersely.

Phil put down his fork, having had all that he could stomach. He managed a final sip of orange juice. Bill could see the pain on the great mathematician's face.

"So how's Susan?" Big Bill asked him.

Phil sipped his juice. "Taking it well, all things considered. I think she wants to get going as soon as possible. She doesn't want to spend the day driving in circles around Atlanta just to avoid King Kronos." He then added: "I think she's in a lot of pain, Bill."

Dr. Kramer then considered the new man. "Bill tell you the rules around here yet?"

"I know the rules," Hastings said.

Phil absently fiddled with the nexus alarm on his necklace, a small portrait of Meher Baba, an Indian spiritual master who was still alive in 1958. "If you want my advice, don't wander too far too fast. King Kronos will knock you on your ass if you do."

De Varnier nexus alarms, which all chrononauts had to wear, merely warned them of the proximity of important historical interstices. Though Jean de Varnier had demonstrated that movement in time was possible, *something* prevented actual interference with truly major historical events that were yet to come and were, as a consequence, inexorable. Sometimes, if the nexus were extraordinarily important, the force of history — nicknamed King Kronos by some, God by others — would keep them far from the vicinity so as not to disturb the normal unfolding of events. Otherwise a chrononaut was free to roam, do research . . . free to do just about anything.

Free enough, Big Bill reminded himself, to spend a few days in a Marietta jail after arguing with a police officer over a speeding ticket. . . .

Big Bill knew how the past protected itself, but he also knew that the

institute did not condone even the merest contact with the citizenry. Their Eleventh Commandment was unequivocal: THOU SHALT OBEY THE KING.

Big Bill noticed that Phil was not his normal buoyant self that morning. Undoubtedly he was brooding over the loss they were about to experience with Susan Cresti. The unexpected presence of a new Arrival probably was part of it as well.

Bill saw no reason to postpone the inevitable. If Susan was up, and if the other boarders had already said their good-byes, then they'd best be off. Besides, it would give him extra time to think about their new Arrival. He didn't like any of his wards to be upset for *any* reason, and Phil clearly was upset.

And, as he thought about it, so was Mrs. Beauchamp.

Big Bill looked at his watch, then turned to Hastings. "Emma will make you comfortable while I'm gone. We've got magazines by the dozen, a TV in every room. Shortwave radio, all sorts of amenities. I'll be gone about an hour, so just make yourself at home."

Hastings looked around the large kitchen, then the sitting room. Then he glanced at the ceiling, where now could be heard the sounds of the other residents of Willow House getting up.

He said, "If you don't mind, I'd rather go with you."

With his hands hanging at his sides, he looked like a little boy lost — or somebody who didn't know what to do with his hands.

Phil Kramer saw it, and so did Big Bill. Hastings appeared neither desperate nor shy, two qualities usually present in a new Arrival. Even so, if he was experiencing disorientation, then being with the Housemaster might help put him at ease.

Unless, Big Bill thought suddenly, he had other reasons for wanting to stick close by.

What that implied sent his heart racing.

"All right," he said. "But I'd rather leave that up to Susan. It's her ride, after all."

Hastings pursed his lips and merely nodded.

Willow House was, by 1958, nearing the century mark. Built shortly after Sherman's fabled march to the sea, it rose three stories high, with gabled roofs and bay windows along the upper floors. It boasted twenty-two

bedrooms, several bathrooms, and complete medical facilities for the dying elite of the twenty-first century who were invited to spend their last days away from the horrors of their century. Built into Willow House were special filtration systems hidden in the plumbing and air ducts just in case something should slip through. Theory had it, though, that the de Varnier Effect would not let anything inimical affect the present era. Any intrusive organism — or even a person — from the future would be held in check, protecting the inevitability of historical processes.

Still, it fell to Big Bill as Housemaster to maintain the safety of the inhabitants of Willow House, both physically emotionally. And it always pained him when it came time for one of his boarders to leave.

He felt now that it was Susan Cresti's time.

Gathered before the great physicist's door were four or five of Willow House's more mobile tenants. Word had already spread about Hastings's appearance, and their eyes glowed with curiosity when they saw him. Hastings paused behind Nyland at the head of the stairs.

One of the individuals, a man wrapped in cotton gauze with tubes extruding from several places in his body, stood with the help of a sturdy aluminum walker, trailing hoses back into his room. Steam hissed beneath his bandages, and in the air was a goblin mist of eucalyptus leaves.

Another tenant, gnarled and twisted by a degenerative bone disease, rolled up in her motorized wheelchair.

"Bill?" the deformed woman asked. "Who is this?"

The other residents stood back timidly.

"They haven't come for you, Bill. Have they?" the man in the steam bandages piped. Each of them could see the vast physical disparity between themselves and the new Arrival.

Big Bill held out his enormous arms and belayed any further questions. "Folks, this is Pierce Hastings. He's just come Down to us."

The misshapen woman in the wheelchair guided it up to Hastings. "You're not pulling him, are you, Mr. Hastings? You're not taking Dr. Nyland away."

"No, Rebecca," Big Bill interjected. "He's just come a bit early. Everything is fine." He wondered, though, if anyone there felt the uncertainty in his voice.

The residents studied the new Arrival. Hastings, who stood by the

stairs fairly radiating good health, was not like anyone else who had ever come Downstream to Willow House before.

The Terminals of Willow House knew, just by looking at him, that something was not quite right.

DR. SUSAN Crespi, perhaps their most distinguished resident, had the largest room all to herself, a room filled with antique furniture, a four-poster bed, and century-old, hand-woven antimacassars lacing the arms of a Victorian settee Big Bill had scrounged up for her during one of his unsanctioned outings to Marietta. It had been a risk worth taking among the locals, one that was the least he would have done for so charming a woman.

In her youth, Susan Cresti had been a full-bosomed woman who carried herself proudly through her tenure at Columbia University. But to see her now, in this last week of her life, was to behold the very presence of the Angel of Death, victimized by a true twenty-first-century nightmare. She stood up slowly from her chair, terribly gaunt, using her cane to help her. Emma Beauchamp waited beside her with a small suitcase filled with items Susan would be needing at the hospice.

"I'm ready, Bill," the physicist said. She wore a thin cotton print dress a light azure color, with nylon stockings. They would not be outside long enough for passersby to notice that she also wore special flesh-tone gloves to mask the carcinomas growing there. A tasteful, wide-brimmed hat, perfect for summer, would veil the pallid visage she presented underneath.

In every way she would go out looking like a lady.

Pierce Hastings stood at the door behind Big Bill. Susan tilted her head slightly, acknowledging him with a rather gracious smile from behind her white veil. "Hello," she said.

"Susan, this is Pierce Hastings," Big Bill said. "A little mix-up at the institute. He arrived a bit early."

"Ah," Dr. Cresti said, her hand wobbling slightly on the curve of her cane. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Hastings."

Hastings said nothing, his hands hanging at his sides as if they were hovering above twin six-shooters. Nyland shook his head as if to rid himself of the image. That night, "Maverick" and "The Lawman" would be on TV, and most of the residents spent their time watching television regardless of what was on.

"Dr. Hastings would like to come with us. If that's O.K. with you," Big Bill said. "Help ease the transition."

Susan Cresti forced a weak smile. "It's fine with me, Bill," she said. "Whatever you say."

Big Bill did not want to use Susan as a pawn in a game with the institute. It was *her* journey, her last journey in this life, and he didn't want Susan to be made uncomfortable by Hastings's unexpected arrival. He would do anything for his boarders, even if it meant garnering a reprimand or two from the institute.

As it was, he had already scored several.

"It's a pretty day out," Nyland told her as he assisted her into the hall. Those who had gathered at her door moved back to let them pass.

"Yes," the great physicist said. "Can you smell the jonquils? My mother used to grow jonquils. Jonquils and tulips, color everywhere."

Big Bill then hefted her in his arms like a bundle of sticks and carried her to the head of the stairs. She weighed as much as an eiderdown pillow.

The man encased in the steam bandages edged his walker over to the stairs and buttonholed Hastings before he could follow them. "What's the news on the war? What's happening Up There?"

"They're sending people like *me* Down Here," Hastings replied rather curtly.

Hastings turned away and quickly followed Nyland and Susan Cresti down to the foot of the stairs, leaving the horrors behind him at the top of the stairs.

"You can do what you want with my albums," Susan Cresti was saying. "I'd keep Patsy in my personal space, but you never know who might dig me up a thousand years from now when it decays. Wouldn't want to give them the wrong idea."

"King Kronos wouldn't let that happen, I don't think," Big Bill responded.

With the tenants of Willow House watching from above, a chorus of silence settled about them, attesting to their uniform sorrow at seeing their friend go.

This was the worst part of being a Housemaster. Of all his duties, Big Bill loathed this particular one.

They stepped outside onto the porch.

Nyland turned around so that Susan could see the last of her friends.

The institute was not too keen on simple pleasures. Only protocol.

They waved, and more than a few of the tenants were now beginning to weep. Last night's farewell party had been bad; this was worse.

"Good-bye, Emma," Susan Cresti smiled at the black woman. "Thanks for everything."

Emma Beauchamp was alone on the porch in her uniform whites. "You be careful now," Mrs. Beauchamp said.

The garage connected to the House in such a way that Big Bill could leave Willow House without anyone on the outside knowing the kind of cargo he bore. Today, however, he merely carried Susan around to the garage, where their new Plymouth station wagon awaited. Finches jabbered in the hickory trees above, and distantly a church bell called its parishioners to Sunday services.

As they got under way, Susan turned slightly to speak to Hastings. "I'm glad you're coming along, Mr. Hastings. It's nice to have company. Especially on a day like today."

She seemed to have spring on her mind — the lush green of Georgia, the smell of honeysuckle on the breeze.

The new man, however, said nothing. His eyes merely roamed the landscape, taking in all that he could. Not a detail went unnoticed.

Big Bill slowly wheeled the enormous vehicle down the shaded streets. He had always gotten a secret pleasure from their '58 Plymouth station wagon. It was like driving a dinosaur, one with winged tail fins. But observing Pierce Hastings in the rearview mirror brought an end to even that simple pleasure. The institute was not too keen on simple pleasures. Only protocol.

They soon approached a more squalid corner of Georgia, passing by a country church where dozens of black people, dressed in their Sunday best, were solemnly entering the steepled entrance. Piano music could be heard quite clearly as they drove slowly by.

"Is this the only way into Atlanta?" Hastings asked after a short while. The dusty lane to either side of them displayed a vision of tumbledown America that era was famous for, and a racial class most people wanted to ignore.

It was true, however, that Big Bill was not taking the most direct route into northwest Atlanta. Instead, Big Bill meandered slowly down one street after another, avoiding all main avenues and busy thoroughfares. He barely edged up above thirty-five miles an hour, keeping mainly to the broken back roads, all the while mindful of King Kronos.

This was protocol.

"It's the scenic route," Big Bill said over his shoulder.

A little girl waved at them from the front porch of a house that sprouted a '50 Studebaker crouched on cinder blocks. Susan waved to the child with a gloved hand.

"The scenic route?" Hastings asked. "You've got to be kidding."

Behind her white veil, Susan Cresti smiled. "He's doing this for me, Mr. Hastings," the great physicist said. "Someday he'll do it for you."

"I'm avoiding nexuses, is what I'm doing," Big Bill said as he turned a corner onto a slightly busier street.

A streamlined late-model Corvette, top down, raced past them like a blue torpedo. The young man at the wheel gave them the finger for being such slowpokes. Big Bill let him pass, taking his time. He did this for Susan, but he was also doing it for himself. It gave him time to think: his instincts were telling him that his tenure as Housemaster just might be at an end.

"It's still beautiful country," Susan then said. "Will be for a hundred years or more. Nice to know some things never change."

They happened just then to pass a police officer who was speaking to a gathering of black youths at a small park. One boy held a basketball. They all looked scared, as if shooting hoops on a Sunday morning were some sort of civil infraction, and they had just been caught at it. Bill also noted the way in which Hastings took in the scene.

"Yes," Hastings said. "Some things never do change."

The circuitous route into north Atlanta took them a good forty minutes, and by the time they neared the street where the hospice was located, Big Bill noticed just how exhausted Susan had become from the trip. Her head dropped like the stem of a flower, nodding in the wind.

"Almost there," he said, turning across a quiet intersection.

"It's like a dream, Bill," she whispered, looking up. "Being in the past . . . makes you think the future never will come . . . never be what you think it will be. . . ."

Bill gave her a brave smile. He had hoped that her pain pills would last her the trip to the hospice. He dispensed all the prescription medicines out of his own personal space, and Susan's were the most potent he had. Now they seemed to be wearing off. He touched the accelerator.

Just then a red warning light began flashing on the dashboard. It could have been the oil gauge or the temperature gauge. It was neither, however, for at the very same moment, the personal de Varnier alarms the three of them wore began their tiny chiming like the speech of small birds.

"Oh!" Susan Cresti cried out as she laid a thin hand over her bracelet. With a twist, she immediately shut it off.

Quickly, and as discreetly as possible, Big Bill eased the large station wagon beneath the shade of a tall hawthorn beside a sidewalk. They were closer to downtown now. Across the street an indoor movie theater was showing *The Bridge on the River Kwai* for a Sunday matinee. Some kids had already gathered at the entrance, fidgeting and poking each other.

"What's that for?" Hastings asked, leaning forward, pointing to the dashboard.

"It's the alarm I installed in the car after Phil's episode," Big Bill said. "There's a convergence of de Varnier coordinates nearby. We have to wait until it passes."

Susan placed her hand to her throat. She could now *feel* the nearness of the de Varnier points, a palpable presence, the feathered passage of History . . . the Logos brushing up against them.

"What's that —," Hastings began, distraught, slightly panicked. Big Bill had forgotten how eerie it was sensing the literal force of Time nearby. It came upon them as a sluggishness, a warmth, a stultifying *tingling* that sank to one's very bones.

"It's the king," Susan breathed. "Can you see who it is?"

One car after another proceeded through the intersection. A boy on a bicycle rode by, heading east; an elderly white couple walked on the opposite side of the street. The kids continued to fidget in line for the movie.

But there was no way to tell who it could be. So they waited. Those were the rules. And Big Bill, this time, was sticking to the rules.

However, the force of the passing nexus field did not affect them further.

"Whoever it is," Big Bill said finally, "they've moved on. Probably a baby in the backseat of a car."

Hastings hovered between them, pinching his medallion between his thumb and forefinger. Nyland could feel his breath. "Does this happen often?" he asked.

"Only when we're in Atlanta," Bill said. "Marietta's a pretty dull place. That's why they chose it for 1958. Atlanta is just starting to heat up."

Big Bill presumed that Hastings knew what he meant by that, presumed he had been briefed. Instead, Hastings bore an almost feral look in his eyes as he sat back. It was a deeply troubled expression that Bill had never encountered before in an Arrival.

Big Bill slowly drove back onto the street, rumbling ahead with great caution. Bill had wired the car so that the carburetor would choke if they got too close to a nexus field. De Varnier points were such that if a chrononaut got within several yards of converging nexus points, they would be physically repelled — given the boot by King Kronos. He had experienced it before when he and Phil Kramer had gone on one of his illicit excursions to see Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate give a poetry reading at Emory University. Even though the de Varnier field protecting both poets had been just a few yards in width, someone else of greater historicity had passed the hall somewhere outside, and he and Phil were forced away from the vicinity by the strength of that person's nascent significance.

Rosa Kline, a resident of Willow House at the time, suspected that it was probably some graduate student soon to eclipse both Tate and Penn Warren. However, none of them would ever know. King Kronos had simply made it clear that they were not to be on the premises.

Big Bill reached the end of the block, wheeling the station wagon into a curved driveway before a nondescript one-story building made of red bricks. Dogwoods and sculpted rhododendrons surrounded it. It was just one of several unassuming buildings along the street, huddled behind a phalanx of June-green trees. Most were old-age homes, except that one was different from the others. One was the de Varnier Institute's hospice for the era.

"Is this the place?" Hastings asked. A nurse and a lone doctor emerged from the building.

"This is the place," Bill told him.

Nyland cranked the gearshift into park as the two hospice personnel waited.

"Bill," Susan said, turning to him. They had both prepared for this moment; but even so, it was difficult. It was *always* difficult. "Thanks for the trip to Memphis. Thanks for Graceland."

"Don't thank me," Big Bill told her, trying not to think about what might be revealed to Hastings. "Thank the army for keeping Elvis far enough away so that we could get a good view." What got said, got said: he would worry later about recriminations from the institute. This was Susan's moment.

"Still, the trip was worth it." She then turned to Hastings. "It was a pleasure to have met you, Mr. Hastings. You'll enjoy Willow House. Bill's the best of the Housemasters. You'll see."

All Hastings could do was smile thinly and nod to the dying woman.

"So this is where we all end up," Hastings said as they began their slow sojourn back to Marietta.

"No," Big Bill said. Hastings now sat beside him in the front seat. "Sometimes we lose them in the middle of the night, and we have the hospice come pick them up. Sometimes they perish ten feet out of the Gate, happy to have made it this far."

Big Bill looked at him once, wondering if he had gotten the message: you *walked* from the Gate, and you *called* for a taxi. And you look as healthy as a horse. . . .

Now it was just the two of them — or the two of them plus the institute.

"I don't know —," Hastings said. He now seemed quite disturbed. Perhaps the trip to the hospice had not been a good idea. On the other hand, *he* had suggested it.

"What?"

"Forget it."

"Look —"

"I said forget it," Hastings fired back. "This was a mistake, that's all." He stared out ahead, sitting rigidly in the wide front seat of the monstrous vehicle.

Big Bill's hands were now clammy upon the steering wheel. He couldn't hold back, especially if the institute was recording this by autocam-remote from Hastings's personal space, since they now had the technology to do so. He had to say *something*.

"What's going on here? You *chose* to come along. Nobody forced you."

Pierce Hastings was, at the moment, inscrutable.

"They should have told me," he breathed.

"Told you what?"

He gestured idly out the window. "This."

It was hard to tell what *this* meant. The neighborhoods they passed through were either totally white or totally black, and poverty clung to the one, not to the other. Every town, every era, had its blemishes. If Hastings had witnessed the Blight in Zaire, then he had undoubtedly seen worse.

At least here there were no rotting bodies in the street or humans turning into vapors where they stood. . . .

Big Bill took an entirely different route home. There were fewer nexuses in the poorer neighborhoods, thus the risk was minimal. He pushed his foot to the floor, accelerating slightly.

"What do you mean by 'this,' exactly?" Big Bill demanded.

"It's so . . . barbaric," Hastings said.

"It's 1958. What did you expect?"

"Those people," Hastings said as they drifted past a cluster of tar-paper shacks, smoke trailing from tin chimney pipes. "They shouldn't have to live like that. Nobody should."

"It won't be that way forever."

"No," Hastings said ominously, "it won't." His neck suddenly turned a deep red, and his eyes seemed to burn.

"I shouldn't have come," he said in a low voice. "That's all. I shouldn't have come."

HOWEVER, AS Big Bill rounded a corner on his way to the main road back to Marietta, the dashboard de Varnier alarm flickered back on. They were almost beyond Atlanta's city limits. Here they crossed into a whites-only community, with very proper homes on cleanly swept streets.

"Damn it," Big Bill muttered, seeing the de Varnier lights flash. "I thought this might happen—" Almost as soon, their own alarms began sounding off. "O.K., O.K." he said, switching his off.

He slowed the station wagon, but then, much to his surprise, the car began to sputter. The two men lurched forward as the automobile struggled to continue.

Hastings looked at him as he disengaged his alarm. "What now?"

"We're near another nexus, a big one this time."

The station wagon coughed and gagged, as it was designed to do, and Big Bill guided it over in neutral to the side of the street, next to a white picket fence that encompassed the offices of a family physician. They rolled to a stop, tires crunching in the gutter.

Nyland discovered that his heart was pounding savagely in his chest — but not from their proximity to a crucial historical personage. On some deeper level, he had been worrying about his own future. The institute would undoubtedly send him back to Nebraska, where there were deserts with fields of spiny ocotillo and hedgehog cactus; back to a world without winter, a world where diseases had microchip brains and could unravel in a month what it had taken evolution half a billion years to painstakingly construct.

Back to a world that had devoured a wife and a child and had left him with nothing else to do but try to heal as best he could . . . elsewhere.

Lost in his own thoughts, Big Bill sat thinking, as the dashboard alarm mindlessly winked on and off. King Kronos was so close that Big Bill could actually feel him brush against them. As it was, breathing became difficult, and Big Bill could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

Quite unexpectedly, Hastings wrenched open the door to his side of the station wagon. "I'm not going to sit here and suffocate in this heat," he announced, stepping out.

"Pierce," Big Bill started. "Don't leave the car. It's better to ride it out."

Hastings took off his gray cardigan and tossed it back into the station wagon. Large half-moons of sweat rocked beneath his armpits.

"O.K.," Big Bill said, noticing the heat inside the car. "Wait for me."

He then climbed out, leaving the station wagon with its crimson alarm still flashing on the dashboard.

"We can walk to its outer perimeter," he told Hastings as he came up beside him. "We'll leave the car for the time being."

The de Varnier convergence field was quite perceivable now. It made the air thick and seemed to push at their backs like a summer breeze to kites lofting above a city park.

So the two of them walked to stay ahead of it.

By the time they got to the end of the block, the going became easier. At least they could breathe.

This reminded Nyland of the day he and Phil had gone to Myrtle Beach to attempt to see Meher Baba, Phil's spiritual master. But King Kronos washed over them like a powerful tide, pushing them away as if they were mere specks on the sands of time. The de Varnier field surrounding the holy man was nearly one mile wide — wider even than the nexus point now beginning to grow around Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas.

They walked up the block — *escorted* was the more appropriate term — to a corner where they found a small diner open for business. HOG HEAVEN, the sign above it said.

The diner seemed to be about one-third full.

"Christ —," Hastings began. "Do we have to go in there?" Beyond the diner was a wooded grove, thickly entwined with deep-green kudzu vines.

"Looks like it," Big Bill said, feeling like a computer bit being shuffled around a bad sector on an optical disk. There was room to maneuver, but not much. It was either the grove or the diner.

Neither option seemed desirable, though. If his head was on the chopping block with the institute, this would certainly bring the ax down. Mingling with the natives was *definitely* not on the List of Things to Do. Bill did not see that they had any choice in the matter, however.

"We'll order lunch," Big Bill told him. "If it gets really bad, we'll slip out the rear door and go through the woods."

Big Bill opened the door to the small diner.

"Act normal. Grab a booth in back. Go on," he urged. "Pretend you're one of them."

"I can barely walk," Hastings protested.

Hog Heaven seemed typical for the fifties. Two waitresses snapping gum went hither and yon among the tables. A freckle-faced adolescent kid, dressed crisply in white with a paper hat cocked at a jaunty angle on his head, cranked levers behind the soda fountain. On the grill, hamburgers sizzled, and the air was filled with the fragrance of cooked onions and french fries.

Hastings, as instructed, located a booth in the back and slid right into it. Big Bill lowered himself at a more languorous pace. Several people had seen them come in, but none had made any particular note of it. A man built like Big Bill wasn't too much out of place in Georgia in 1958, nor was a small man like Pierce Hastings. They fit.

A rather bouncy seventeen-year-old waitress brought them water in blue-gray plastic glasses with fluted sides, remnants of the art deco thirties that still lingered architecturally in parts of Atlanta, a city known for holding on to the past.

"How y'all doin'?" the girl said cheerfully. Her name badge said *Debbie*. "What kin I getcha?"

Pierce Hastings stared up at her. "Nothing," he said almost fiercely. "Water's fine." Whereupon he clutched his glass and greedily drained all but the ice.

Two men in their late twenties sat at the counter. One had a jaw bulging with tobacco; the other one smoked a cigarette. They watched Nyland and Hastings over their shoulders. The two acted as if part of their Sunday entertainment had been interrupted by the entrance of the newcomers.

"Cokes," Bill said quickly, giving her a big smile. "Little too warm out there for me and my friend. Two Cokes'll do it."

"Gotcha," Debbie said, penciling the order.

Hastings set his glass down loudly. Nyland clamped a big hand down on the top of it.

"Are you looking for trouble?" he grated.

"I was thirsty," Hastings hissed. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Listen to me," Big Bill said in a low voice. "See those two guys there? They probably have got a couple of pointed hats and white sheets in their closets at home. Maybe a shotgun or two. There's a *reason* we're not supposed to mingle with the locals, and they're one of them." He jerked his thumb at them over his shoulder.

Behind them, two girls about the same age as their waitress dropped several quarters into the Wurlitzer. A moment later the Everly Brothers began to sing about somebody's bird dog. The two girls giggled at them in their booth.

The waitress had spoken a few words to the fry cook — who looked as if he might be the manager of Hog Heaven — and now *another* pair of eyes was trained upon them.

Swell, Big Bill thought dourly. This is just dandy.

Big Bill suddenly wished Phil had been strong enough to have come along. He was going to need a character witness somewhere down the line. Unquestionably this little excursion would go before an institute review board.

Big Bill felt the hand of King Kronos pass over them as the nexus field expanded ever so slightly. He could see that Hastings felt it as well. The new man's eyes widened as pearls of sweat stood out on his forehead.

The man then sat bolt upright. "I can't stand it here," Hastings announced.

"Easy. . .," Big Bill encouraged.

The waitress returned with two large Cokes. Hastings grabbed his and drained it in one long pull. He then set the glass down, gasping for air. However, his eyes remained locked on a sign over Big Bill's shoulder that had been prominently displayed above the grill. There was no doubt as to the sincerity of its message.

NO COLOREDS, it said in bright red letters; it also seemed to be a permanent fixture to the wall. Alongside it were a framed steelhead trout, various hunting pictures, several bowling trophies, and a frame replica of the surrender document Japan signed in 1945. These things belonged to the fry cook, modest mementos of his life.

At that point a peculiar quiet fell about the diner as the jukebox's robot arm lowered another 45 onto the turntable. In that one suspended moment, with the burgers frying on the grill and coffee cups being clinked upon porcelain saucers, everyone's attention was drawn to the sidewalk beyond the window. Even Hastings could see it.

Passing directly in front of the diner was a family headed home from church: a mother, two small girls, and a tall, handsome eighteen-year-old boy. The boy had paused to stare inside the café. He had smelled the hamburgers cooking there, the french fries. He paused long enough to look inside the diner to see that neither he nor his family was welcome there. For he was black, and Hog Heaven was off-limits.

The teenager turned his gaze away, embarrassed, and hurried to catch up with his family.

"Gawd, don't we get 'em," said one man at the counter.

"Never know where they come from," said the other. The two men at the counter then laughed, consuming their tobacco and chuckling like demons on leave from Hell.

Not only had they found the black boy amusing, but so did the fry cook and another man at the far end of the counter who wore a red plaid short-sleeved cowboy shirt a size too small for him.

Big Bill Nyland suddenly considered his companion. "Pierce? Are you all right?"

"No," Hastings said, furiously, loudly. "No, I am *not* all right. And neither are *these* people —"

Debbie, their waitress, who had been close enough to hear, said, "Hey, mister. No need to get upset 'bout the colored folk. They come by *all* the time."

"Upset? I'm not fucking upset!" Hastings glowered at her. "I'm god-damned pissed off!"

The fat man in the skintight cowboy shirt laughed as he twirled a toothpick in his mouth. "You get used to all kinds of things 'round here, even niggers. Ain't that right, boys?" he said to the other men at the counter.

Pierce Hastings glared at the jukebox from which the Kingston Trio mourned the death of Tom Dooley. *Then* he stared at the cowboy.

Hastings growled. "You've got no right to use that word."

The man with the cigarette at the counter said, "We call 'em as we see 'em. I'd call 'em niggers, wouldn't you, Deke?"

"What else we gonna call 'em?" Deke said. Everyone laughed at this.

"But don't take it personal," the fat man with the red cowboy shirt said.

Hastings then jumped away from the booth ferret-quick, and, for the first time, Big Bill noticed how much the man had been sweating. He had left a dark streak along the seat back where he sat. And now he was angry. *Extremely* angry. . . .

"I am taking it *personal*. *Very* personal," he declared. "Like, if I don't, I'm going to *bust*."

"Then go ahead and bust," laughed the manager, as if, by sheer size alone, Pierce Hastings could pose no threat to them. "World could do with one less nigger-lover —"

Pierce Hastings's face turned an outraged crimson as his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"Pierce —" Big Bill began.

Then, in one of his uncharacteristic moments of clarity, Big Bill suddenly realized that Pierce Hastings was no institute watchdog after all. He was, indeed, a very sick man.

As he had been all this time.

That was one revelation. What Hastings did next was another.

His right shoulder dipped, and his hand disappeared from sight.

Everyone in the diner saw it, and more than one of them gasped in amazement.

Hastings's hand plunged into his personal subdimensional space and came back with the most powerful handgun in the entire solar system, a Williams Series VI blaster — all thirty pounds of it.

"Oh shit —," Big Bill said.

Hastings lurched back against the far wall, clutching the enormous gun in both of his hands, wrestling with its ponderous weight.

The manager stood up. "Hey," he said. "I wouldn't do anything *stupid* with that thing if I were you."

"If I were you, *dickhead*," Pierce railed, "I'd have blown my fucking brains out a long time ago and saved the world the trouble!"

"*Jesus, I think he's gonna shoot!*" yelled the fat cowboy at the end of the counter.

People suddenly scrambled for the front door, except for the two men at the counter and the fat cowboy stuffed in the red plaid shirt.

"Pierce, don't —," Big Bill started. But it was too late. The pin had been pulled.

Hastings lifted the powerful handgun and took aim at the two men at the counter, for they were the closest. "*You racist motherfuckers!*" Hastings shouted.

But try as he might, he couldn't get a shot off. Nyland watched as Hastings struggled against the inhibiting vectors of Time. King Kronos wouldn't let him do it. Each person was protected in some way or another by de Varnier's First Law.

Pierce screamed and took aim at anybody he could, but the blaster was continually pushed away. Huge veins stood out on the backs of his hands as he tried to squeeze the trigger mechanism. The manager had his hands up, and the two men at the counter turned a sickly pale color.

But the blaster was continually shoved away.

"God *damn* it!" Hastings screamed.

However, while he might not have been able to get a shot off at one of the men at the counter, he was able to take aim at the jukebox.

He pulled the trigger, and the snout of the Williams burst with a brilliant light. The jukebox and the Kingston Trio immediately cater-wailed back through the wall in flames, crashing on out onto the street,

trailing sparks, gamma rays, and a whole hell of a lot of noise.

"Whoa!" one of the devils at the counter bellowed. "Didja see that, Deke?"

Pierce swung the weapon back up at them, but still, the immutable laws of Time would not let the future affect the past.

"*You did this!*" he accused those who were left inside the diner. "*You did this to Trish! You did this to me!*"

The weight of the gun drew it down, and Pierce blew a nice hole in the floor. The waitresses screamed.

Pierce staggered with his uncontrollable rage.

He then saw above the grill the sign that said *NO COLOREDS*. The fry cook and Debbie the waitress disappeared down behind the counter.

The sign exploded outward into the blue sky, taking with it a large chunk of the roof.

The force of the blaster kicked it up and back of Pierce. Big Bill leaped up and yanked it away from him, burning his hand.

However, the instant the gun left Hastings's grip, it disappeared back into his personal subdimensional space.

Hastings, sobbing now and exhausted, his rage spent, fell against the last booth. A misty haze ghosted throughout the diner.

Nyland took advantage of this pause in the action to grab Hastings and get them both out of there. If *this* incident got back to the institute, he was *really* cooked. They'd pull the whole damn *House* out of 1958.

He swept up the deflated man and flung him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Four large steps, and he was through the hole in the wall left by the smoldering jukebox.

"Sorry about this, folks," he said on his way out.

Big Bill Nyland, bred for combat in 2079, was made for this sort of thing, and made an easy dogleg through two buildings, then across a vacant lot. As it was, the de Varnier effect had diminished sufficiently that they were able to reach their vehicle without being repelled, thus forced to confront the locals who were gathering their wits together.

"Oh God," Pierce breathed. "Oh Jesus. . . ."

Big Bill pushed Hastings into his side of the station wagon. His own clothing was now sopping from where he had borne Hastings. He then raced back around and climbed in behind the wheel. He slammed the door and fired up the vehicle.

"Christ, Pierce, I thought you were an auditor. I thought you were from the goddamn institute."

All this as Nyland revved the powerful V-8 engine and tore away from the vicinity as quickly as he could.

Pierce Hastings's mouth opened, and he gulped air, trembling with his anguish.

"Don't you know there are *rules*?"

"I couldn't stand it . . .," Hastings finally said.

"Stand what?"

"Those people . . . laughing at that family. . . ."

Sweat dribbled from Hastings's hand where he leaned it against the dashboard for support. He looked as if he had just run a marathon race in world-record time.

"What were you trying to prove back there?"

"My wife," he finally confessed. "She was killed in the Blackness—" His anger was now forcing up bitter tears.

Big Bill risked a glance at Hastings as the speedometer rose into the upper sixties. "Blackness? What are you talking about?"

It took a moment for Hastings to catch his breath.

"She was *black*," he then said. "Caught a tailored virus someone turned loose in Miami last year. It goes for the skin code in the genome, then begins to *eat*. Five million dead so far. . . . Trish died while I was in Africa," he revealed. "White Aryans for Christ, they call themselves. Fat, well-fed white people who want to do the world a favor."

He leaned back in his seat as the shadows of trees rippled across his face. The tears mingled with the sweat that now poured from his body. Big Bill could now see how Hastings's anger had exacerbated his illness.

"What's the fucking use?" Hastings asked no one in particular. "Maybe we're not worth it," he whispered finally. "Maybe we should just kill ourselves —"

He lapsed into a tortured silence as Nyland drove.

Bill held tightly to the steering wheel, slowing as three police cars passed them going the opposite direction. They seemed to be in a hurry — much like Big Bill's heart. He had never heard of the Blackness, but he had suffered his own loss to something like it. Marjorie and Rachael had perished in the Great Flu of '71. He knew what grief could do to a man.

* * *

EMMA BEAUCHAMP stood out on the front porch waiting for them when they finally reached Willow House.

"What happened?" she asked Big Bill. "There's something on the radio —"

"He's got a Williams Series VI in his personal space," Big Bill said to her, climbing out from his side of the car. "Blew up a jukebox and part of a diner."

Big Bill scanned the street to see if they had been followed. They hadn't. It seemed as peaceful as when they had left earlier with Susan Cresti.

"Have you heard of something called the Blackness?"

"No," Emma responded.

"Has your husband?"

"Not that I know of," she told him. "Lyle's still in Dallas, measuring the Dealey Plaza nexus. He hasn't been Up for years. Why?"

Bill then told her the full story of Hog Heaven, including the revelation about Hastings's wife.

"And I thought I was in trouble. I thought it was because of my excursions." He looked down at Pierce. "He came here for revenge."

Big Bill Nyland stood there in the shade of the hawthorns and the elms that guarded Willow House. He hadn't been Upstream in nine years, and had seen a great many new friends leave this earthly plane during their stay at Willow House. He had done so trusting that the institute would keep him informed of developments Upstream that might affect his patients Downstream.

Mrs. Beauchamp approached the station wagon. She spoke to Hastings. "We'd better get you cleaned up and into bed, Mr. Hastings. You've had a busy day, it seems like." She helped Hastings from the car.

However, Big Bill paused there in the leafy shadows of his domain. He had almost blown it, he realized. Blown it again.

This time, however, it was not his fault.

He now had the Blackness to think about, the hate that had killed Trish Hastings, and the anger that yet consumed her husband's heart.

He stood on the shadowed flagstones of the front walk, the faces of his friends looking down from the many windows of Willow House . . .

the face of the black youth looking in at Hog Heaven. . . .

"What?" Emma asked. "What is it?"

"I was thinking about something I saw," he said as a strange, unexpected calm descended upon him. The Blackness was a nightmare he couldn't fathom just yet, only the hurt Pierce Hastings bore. The institute seemed so unspeakably far away just then.

Still, he was a physician, and it was his job to cure those whom he could — by whatever means.

He turned to Mrs. Beauchamp. "How long do you suppose it would take us to get to Auburn Avenue from here?"

"Auburn Avenue?" Emma paused. "That's on the other side of town." Then she gave him a look of complete and total surprise. "Oh!" she said. "You're not thinking of going to see —"

He pondered the desperate expression on Pierce Hastings's face. He looked terribly alone now, a man trapped in an era — and a part of the country — that would ultimately destroy his wife more than a century hence. It wouldn't do to send a man to his grave with so much bitterness.

"Bill," she pleaded. "They told us not Doctor —"

But there were some things worth risking one's life and limb for — some things worth risking one's job for.

And *that* makes a good Housemaster.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hastings said, weakly looking up at them.

"A trip across town," Big Bill Nyland said. "If we try, we can make five o'clock services."

"Services? I don't —"

"Ebenezer Baptist Church," Big Bill said. "His congregation is growing now, as is his de Varnier field. But I'll bet we can get close enough to see him when services let out."

Emma Beauchamp headed up the stairs to prepare Pierce Hastings's bath and to set out a fresh change of clothing.

"I'm tired," Hastings then said. "No more trips."

How could anyone cure such cancers of the spirit when even God allowed such barbarisms as Hog Heaven to exist? Big Bill knew. There was a church on the far side of Atlanta, and a fledgling civil rights movement only now beginning to grow around a man the institute had told them time and again to avoid.

"I think Trish would want you to take this particular trip," Big Bill Nyland said, helping the new man into Willow House.

"But the institute—," Hastings began.

"To hell with the institute. They're Up There, and we're Down Here. Besides," Big Bill told him slowly, savoring it. "This is what I do for my friends," he said. "This one's on me."



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Bill Johnson's story concerns Chicago politics, and, as one character says: "Chicago is to politics what venereal disease is to sex." The main question posed here is not, can the dead vote, but for whom will they vote!

Vote Early, Vote Often

By Bill Johnson

I HATED CHICAGO.

"Beautiful city you've got here, Mayor," I lied smoothly. She smiled proudly and nodded.

Outside, on the main platform, the Governor finished his standard stump speech. I timed the five minutes of spontaneous cheering I'd hired for the network sound bite of the day. The crowd cheated me by a full minute.

I hated Chicago.

"The latest tracking polls look pretty good," the pollster said. He was medium height, medium build, medium voice, with an earnest expression on his face, just like every other pollster I'd ever met. I wondered about that sometimes, if they really existed outside their charts and numbers, or were just a statistical expression of their own software.

"The South has firmed up nicely, so we have a solid base," he said.

"What about the West?" I asked.

"Not so good. We can kiss everything west of the Missouri good-bye. Except for California."

"Which balances out all the rest," I said. "So, we tie in the West. How about the Northeast?"

"We lose," he said promptly. "Their base counters our base in the South."

"Which leaves the Midwest," I said.

"Which leaves the Midwest," he agreed. He frowned.

"Frankly, it looks like a tie again. We get Ohio; they get Michigan. We get Wisconsin; they get Indiana. Et cetera. It all comes down to one state."

"Illinois," I said.

"Specifically, Chicago," he said. He shoved a stack of printouts across the table to me. I flipped through them rapidly. All I wanted was the estimated precinct totals.

"We win," I said.

"We lose," he corrected. "But not by enough to counterbalance our strength in the suburbs and downstate."

"We take Illinois," I said impatiently. I jump-started my old fantasies about my office in the West Wing of the White House. "That's all that's important."

The pollster hesitated. He took off his glasses, a gesture that, oddly enough, made him seem more like a person, less like a number.

"I'm not the campaign manager," he said slowly. "That's your job. My numbers are based on reality, what people are actually going to do."

"So we win," I said.

He paused again and cleaned his glasses with his handkerchief.

"Someone once told me that Chicago is to politics what venereal disease is to sex," he said.

"Meaning what?" I asked.

"Have you taken any precautions?" he asked.

I stopped at that. Vote fraud wasn't possible anymore. Everything was computerized, cross-linked, networked, and secure. Everyone was uniquely identified by brain-wave pattern. No way anyone could rig an election. Not even in Chicago. Not in this day and age.

"Right. And I have some land, east of Miami, that I think might interest you. . . ."

Beautiful at low tide.

"You're trying to tell me. . . .?"

"In Chicago, everyone gets a vote. But I can only poll the living."

"How the hell did you get this?" Broca asked.

I never paid for a spy. That would be unethical. Besides, the problem was, they usually wouldn't stay bought.

But a few careful words to an eager volunteer, a few bucks for lunches light on protein and heavy on alcohol, a little flattery, and, well . . . things happen. So I had in front of me the opposition predictions, by precinct, for the election.

We lost. We lost big. We lost too big to make it up in the suburbs.

"I don't understand," I said. I pointed to one of the precinct totals. "Twelve thousand against us, two thousand for us. Total is fourteen thousand voters. The problem is, I know that precinct. I know that precinct inside out. We're talking five thousand, maybe six thousand, people in the whole place. And I'm counting children, dogs, cats, and the fish in the dentist's aquarium. How do they do this? How do they get away with it?"

"It looks to me like someone is getting out the cemetery vote," Broca said. "It's a Chicago tradition that dying doesn't take away your right to vote."

"Impossible. Ridiculous. No way," I said. I paused. "How do you think they do it?"

"I don't know. Ask Tony Miller," Broca said.

"But he's *dead*," I protested.

"So?" Broca said, and shrugged. He kept working on his fettuccine Alfredo. "This is Chicago, remember? It's everyone's duty to vote early and vote often."

No one ever killed a political machine in Chicago. They got stronger, they got weaker, but they never died. Tony Miller took the best of all three machines — Daley's and Washington's and the younger Daley's — and put them back together.

If you wanted Chicago, you made a deal with Tony. No problem. I knew the rules, and so did Moore, the opposition campaign manager. I had looked forward to the bidding, in a professional sense.

But Tony went and got caught in the wrong bed by the lady's husband and died very, very suddenly right before the election. So the machine went into neutral, waiting for a new boss. I still tried to make a deal, and

so did Moore, but it was like shadowboxing. There just wasn't anyone out there to contact.

"This is crazy! How do you get the dead out to vote? How do you beat the brain-wave machines?"

"For that, we need to talk to Tony Miller," Broca repeated.

"Who is dead," I added.

Broca paused for a moment, and steepled his fingers. His expression was serious.

"There is dead," he said, "and then there is dead."

"And this is Chicago," I said.

"Exactly," he said, and smiled.

CLANCY'S WAS an old-style Irish tavern with a long wooden bar and a glass jar full of sliced Polish sausage at the corner. The crowd was a mix of media types and political hacks.

Both Moore and I had people out tonight to work the media. I nodded approvingly when I saw one of my guys carry a tray heavy with glasses of beer over to a table full of newspaper reporters. I frowned when I saw one of Moore's people buy a round of drinks for a network news crew. Damn it! I had told them and told them: Ink was nice, but electrons win elections.

"Twenty years ago we would never have been here together," Moore said at my elbow.

I turned slowly and nodded. He was a big man, once all muscle, but now the muscle was covered by a thin layer of fat. Not too much fat, but enough to soften the edges, make him look more like a handsome bear of a man than the Greek statue I remembered from college.

"The torchlight parade was only for Democrats, then," he said.

"No Democrats anymore," I said.

"No Republicans either," he said. He sipped his beer. "Now we're all mixed together. Which means I can offer you a job after Tuesday."

"Or I can offer you one," I replied.

"I doubt that," he said. He finished his beer and ordered another.

"You finished with my papers?" he asked.

I opened my briefcase, took out the precinct printouts, and slid them across the table. He flipped through them, clucking his tongue and shaking his head.

"I have got to work on security," he said. He took the reports and tossed them into his briefcase, shut it, and locked it.

"Now, about that job in my administration. . . ."

"How did you do it?" I asked.

"Tony Miller," he said, and smiled.

"Tony Miller is dead," I protested.

"That did slow down negotiations," Moore admitted. "Ah, to hell with it. If you tell the media, they'll just think you're crazy. And a candidate who picks a crazy campaign manager is suspect. I might get two or three points in the polls. All right. We had a séance, and I used a psychic."

"A psychic," I said.

"Right. Oh, I'm talking the full outfit: East European peasant clothes, bandanna in the hair, even a damn crystal ball. Called herself Madame Gladys."

"Gladys?" I asked.

"Yes, Gladys. Anyway, I was desperate, what with Tony dead and the latest poll results showing your side pulling out to a good lead," he said. "One of staff told me she really worked. She could actually talk with the dead. The staffer told me he'd used Gladys to talk with his dead brother. Swore she worked, that she was legitimate. I didn't have anything to lose, so I tried her to contact Tony."

"It worked?" I asked.

"It worked," he said.

"I don't believe you," I said. "Dead is dead. This is crazy."

He finished his beer. He stood and picked up his briefcase.

"We'll see on the first Tuesday in November, won't we?"

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross first studied reports from heart-surgery patients, connected to a heart-lung machine, who reported out-of-body experiences. When their hearts and lungs stopped, when they "died," they left their bodies behind. Sometimes they met relatives, long dead, and had conversations. They returned to their bodies when the heart-lung machine was turned off and their heart shocked back on.

Broca had connections, most of which I didn't want to know about. He insisted that Kübler-Ross was right, that I could use this technique to talk with Tony. The important thing was to shut down my heart and lungs.

"So you're telling me the first thing I have to do to talk with a dead guy is to die myself," I protested.

"Die is such a harsh word," he said.

"What should I call it? A vacation? Let me make this clear to you. No breathing. No heartbeat. No pulse. I call that death," I said.

"People go through this kind of thing every day as part of heart surgery," he argued. "First we superoxygenate your blood, then you take the drug. Your heart and lungs stop. Five minutes later we give you the Adrenalin and shock your heart back to life. Simple."

"Simple," I said.

"Simple," he repeated.

"Then you do it," I said.

"I don't know Tony. I'd never find him," he said.

"I'll get you a photograph," I said.

We went back and forth like this for about an hour. Finally we both ran out of steam and just sat there and glared at each other. Broca spoke.

"You want the Governor in the White House?"

"Yes, but —"

"You want an office in the West Wing?"

"Yes, but —"

"You want to win the election?"

"Yes, but —"

"Yes, but *what?*" he asked.

I shut up.

I hated hospitals.

Even in the office sections, there was still the smell, that damn odor, equal parts of antiseptic, ammonia, and fear. Then the sounds: the constant background of babble of low-pitched, earnest communications, and the beep, whir, click, and hum of machines.

"This is crazy," I protested.

"I agree," Broca said. "But have you got a better idea?"

"Let's try Gladys again. Maybe if we offer more money —"

"We tried, and we tried, and we tried. She won't budge," Broca said.

"This is our only chance. Now shut up and ring the bell."

The door opened, and we walked into a waiting room. The door shut

behind us with a solid click. A nurse opened the glass window that filled half the opposite wall.

"You have an appointment?" she asked. "Last name?"

"Clancy," I lied. No way I'd ever use my real last name.

She checked the appointment book, then slid the window closed. Another click, and the inner door opened. A nurse led us to the doctor's office.

Cavendish was a young man, his hands smooth and soft, but prematurely bald, and the fringe of his hair around his head was gray. A collection of antique scalpels hung on the wall behind him. My medical folder was opened in front of him.

"I don't know why the hell you're here," he said, and shut the folder. "You're overweight, you drink too much, you're under too much stress, and you're as healthy as anyone I've seen. I can't do anything for you."

I nodded to Broca. He stood, opened his briefcase, and placed two large stacks of cash in front of Cavendish's desk.

I love the shock effect of cash. A check may have more zeros, but large piles of green bills, even if the amount is smaller, are more effective.

Besides, it was tougher for the Election Commission to trace cash.

"I need an operation," I said.

"You need your head examined," Cavendish said, his eyes still on the money. I nodded again, and Broca added two more piles to the desk.

"I'm a cardiac surgeon," he protested. "That's the only kind of surgery I know. You don't need cardiac surgery."

I nodded again.

Broca opened the briefcase and shook it over the desk so money rained down. Cavendish looked up, and Broca smiled down at him. Broca, despite his excellent health, looked terrible, with his waxy pallor and the way his gums drew back from his teeth so they looked like fangs. Cavendish paled for a moment as he saw the face behind the Brooks Brothers suit, then his eyes went back to the money.

"How can I help you?" he finally asked.

"I want to die," I said smoothly.

I woke up in a bar.

It looked a lot like Clancy's. The same dark paneled walls, the same long wooden bar, tables and chairs scattered around the main floor. I sat

at one of the tables. The only difference was the customers.

I saw Roman centurions, Italian Renaissance fops, nineteenth-century British businessmen, Chinese bureaucrats in Mao jackets, Indians in saris, Japanese, Javanese, Congolese. . . .

We're talking a whole lot of dead people.

I looked down and realized I was fully dressed in my usual sloppy suit, tie half off. I wasn't naked on a table, electroshock wires connected to my chest, heart stopped. I didn't have IV lines running into my arms. I wasn't packed in ice, tubes up my nose.

I was in a bar.

I needed a beer.

I stood and pushed my way through the crowd. The bartender, a short guy with a body that looked like it was carved from granite, looked at me suspiciously.

"Beer, please," I said.

The bartender stared at me and polished a shot glass with his bar rag.

"Ah, give him a beer, Ingraham," someone said.

"He doesn't look right," Ingraham protested.

"Neither did you to your mother, but she still loved you. I'll pay." Coins fell on the bar. Ingraham slid me a beer.

I turned to thank the stranger. It was Tony.

He looked good for a dead man. His beard was neatly trimmed, his usual hand-tailored Italian silk suit in perfect order, down to the handkerchief in his breast pocket.

"You are one persistent bastard," he said.

I took a drink of beer. It was dark beer, the kind you get in a microbrewery bar around the Bay, thick and rich with a strong aftertaste of hops and yeast. Fresh from the vat downstairs, never pasteurized.

"Let's sit down," he said.

He found us a table, just vacated by what looked to me to be a Roman, an Assyrian, an Egyptian, and an American, all arguing baseball. Tony sat carefully, so his suit wouldn't crease.

"Not what you expected," he said, smiling.

"This is . . . Heaven?" I asked.

"Definitely not," he said, shocked. He paused for a moment. "I'd better explain.

"Heaven is . . . somewhere else. And everyone and every religion has it

right. Even the atheists. And everyone has it wrong. It's what every religion says, even when they contradict each other. But then, it's not. Hell is the same way. The only thing everyone has correct is that Heaven is a place you would want to go," he said. "Hell is definitely a place you'd like to avoid. Definitely."

"And here?" I asked.

"This is a bar," he said.

"Thanks," I said. "That much I can figure out."

"All right, all right. It's a kind of waiting room; it's a place where you go when you're not ready to go on to the next step; it's . . . a bar," he said.

He ordered another round of drinks: scotch rocks for himself, another beer for me. I studied the crowd while we waited.

"You shouldn't be here, you know," he said. "If one of the Angels or Devils comes in and finds you, well. . . ."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your cable," he said, and pointed with his chin.

I half-turned and looked behind me. A long, glowing cable stretched out of my back, up toward the ceiling, and then *twisted* off into another direction. It never touched the walls of the bar, but still it went through them, outside them, around them. Staring at it made my eyes hurt.

"Snap that, and you can buy *me* a beer," Miller said.

"Then let's talk," I said.

"Nothing to talk about. I already made my deal with Moore. I never broke my word down there, and I'm certainly not going to break it here," he said. He leaned over and whispered. "It still counts — you know what I mean? This may not be the greatest place to spend Eternity, but it beats the alternatives. Understand?"

I leaned back and thought frantically. I didn't go through all this to come back empty-handed.

"How's he going to do it?" I asked.

"Moore?" Miller hesitated, then shrugged. "Hospitals in Chicago take brain-wave recordings of every patient. I . . . procured . . . copies of every John and Jane Doe who died in the hospitals. All he has to do is link up to the Polling Computer through the telephone system, and it's as if all those people were invalids, voting from home."

"What about the death certificates? Didn't the hospital enter them into the database?" I asked.

"You know, in Chicago, things get . . . lost. Sometimes," Miller said, and smiled. He sipped at his drink. "I'm sure the death certificates are there. Somewhere. Probably just lost in the mail."

"When will he do it?" I asked. "When will he use the votes?"

"Probably late in the day," he said. "Tougher to do an audit then. Get the votes lost in all the living votes."

"No one gets suspicious?"

"Of course they get suspicious! But this is Chicago. And then it's too late."

Suddenly a bell began to toll behind the bar. Patrons downed their drinks and headed for the door. Miller looked nervous.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Hemingway's bell. Lookout rings it when she spots a Judgment Day press gang. You got to get out of here, and so do I."

"I don't know, Tony. Maybe I should stick around."

"Are you crazy? They'll snap your cable for sure."

"But I've got information they might want. About this terrible vote fraud in Chicago. And I'm sure it wouldn't go well with me to die with this secret on my soul. No, better to go now, with a clean soul," I said piously.

"You got nothing on me," he said. He swore into his scotch, then caught himself.

"It's Moore's problem, not mine," he said.

"True," I admitted. "Maybe. Perhaps we should let higher authority decide."

The bell rang again.

"I'm not going to cheat him," Miller said. "Moore was my friend. Any deal we make has to give him exactly what he wants."

"Come on, Tony. I would never make you break your word. Like you said, what you do here still counts. But we might be able to help each other."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"And what's in it for me?"

I WATCHED THE returns from the ICU.

At least they finally had that damn tube out of my nose. That thing hurt. Personally, I thought they ought to make all doctors wear one, just once, so they knew what it felt like.

Broca sat in a chair next to my bed, and we shared popcorn out of one

of those big metal tins, a meter high and a meter round. Soda bottles littered the bedstand and the floor. Once a nurse came over to scold us. All Broca did was smile at him, big and wide. The nurse turned pale and remembered an emergency down the hall.

The South came in strong for us, even better than expected. The Northeast went for the opposition. On the networks' big maps, the states started to color in: blue for us, red for them.

We turned off the sound. After two years of campaigning, we'd heard all the reporters' voices too many times. And if I'd done my job right, they were saying what I'd said to them, over and over and over, as I put my spin on every event. Or they were saying what Moore had told them. Either way, we'd already heard everything. Now was the time to shut up and listen.

The West flipped red, a steady march toward California. It colored blue, a lone island in the sea, but it was enough.

The Midwest was a checkerboard. Ohio blue, Michigan red, Wisconsin blue, Indiana red.

The phone rang.

"Damn it!" I shouted.

"Impossible," Broca whispered. He stared at the phone like a bird stared at a snake, frozen and fascinated. "No way."

"Answer it," I said, my teeth gritted. On the screen all the states filled in, just as the pollster predicted.

Except Illinois.

"Answer the damn thing," I repeated.

"No," Broca said, and shook his head. "It can't ring. I swear it. This whole area is dead."

The ringing stopped.

Illinois stayed white, undecided, on the screen. Network campaign coverage shifted to local races. I turned the sound back on.

"— local results are slow to come in, though the polls are now closed. Telephone company officials blame the delay on a problem at the main switching unit in the suburbs, where a piece of equipment overloaded and sent a magnetic pulse through the main computer—"

"I told you I set off the magnetic bomb," Broca said.

"Too early," I hissed. "They reloaded the computer from a backup and got the phones working again before the polls closed. Moore voted the dead. You were too early!"

"— the suburbs and downstate have gone heavily for the Governor. The vote tallies in Chicago itself are almost complete, and we're now ready to make a prediction —"

Illinois flipped blue.

I found Moore at Clancy's.

I wasn't supposed to leave the hospital yet, but I said to hell with it. Broca held off the nurses with his smile while I found my clothes and dressed. He drove us downtown and held the door to Clancy's open for me.

Moore sat alone at a table and drank carefully, each drink brought slowly to his mouth, then flipped back neat and quick. Finished, he turned the glass upside down and placed it on the table. The table was a scoreboard, each empty shot glass one point for the other team.

The other team had a lot of points.

"It was close," I agreed. Broca and I sat at the table, pushed glasses aside to give us a place to rest our arms.

"The magnetic bomb was a cute idea," Moore said. He spoke like a man who knows he's drunk, each word carefully rounded and pronounced.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said primly.

"Right. Anyway, it gave me three inches of gray hair when the phones went out. I was just about to download my dead votes."

"The phone company certainly was efficient tonight," I said.

"Yeah, they got that mainframe back up faster than I thought they could. Still had seven minutes left on the clock, before the polls closed, when the phone lines came back," Moore said.

"Seven minutes is a long time," I said.

"Certainly is," Moore said.

I waited. He smiled. I fidgeted. He grinned.

"All right," I burst out finally. "I surrender. You win. What happened?"

"I downloaded," he said, and frowned at the memory. "I poured every one of those brain-wave patterns into the system. I had everything ready to go, enough votes to win the election."

"And?"

"They were all dead," he said.

"This I know. What was the problem?"

"No, I don't mean they were dead. I mean they were really *dead*."

"What?"

"Someone," he said, and ordered another round, "had filed death certificates on them. Every damn one. So they were finally, officially, dead. And even in Chicago, the officially dead can't vote."

"Tony . . . ?" I asked. "But how?"

"I don't know and I don't care. Now just go away," he said. "I feel brain cells multiplying in my head. So I'm going to spend the rest of the night killing the little bastards."

We stood to leave. Broca helped me put on my coat.

A deal is a deal. A promise is a promise. And I had promised Tony to give Moore exactly what he wanted if I won the election.

"So what do you do now?" I asked.

Moore shrugged.

"Find another candidate. Try again. One way or another, I'm going to the White House," he said.

"That's what you really want?" I asked.

"That's what I really want," he said.

I looked at Broca. He shrugged.

"That might be . . . arranged," I said.

Moore stopped, drink halfway to his mouth. He carefully set it down on the table, straightened his tie.

"In the West Wing. With a window."

"What's in it for me?" I asked.

"I still have the recordings. Death certificates can be erased," he said.

"And the next election is only four years away," I mused.

Sometimes you got to deal. . . .





SCIENCE

I S A A C A S I M O V

TARGET: EARTH

I WAS IN the hospital for a period of time recently. (I couldn't help it. As the body grows older, it gets creakier and has to go to the garage now and then for an overhaul.)

While I was there, the head nurse came in and asked me if I would be kind enough to see the State Inspectors, who were due to come by, and if I would answer any questions they might ask me as to the quality of the care I was getting. Well, I was getting very good care, as it happened, and I was perfectly willing to say so.

The Inspector came by as I was waiting at the door of my room (I was perfectly ambulatory), and I promptly told her what she wanted to know — that the nurses were all young and pretty, that they came promptly when signalled, that they were cheerful and helpful, and that the hospital food was helping to keep my weight down.

Whereupon the patient in the

next room, hearing all this (I was speaking in a good, firm voice) stepped out and growled at the Inspector, "Listen, don't believe a word he says. He makes things up."

I started indignantly. There are two insults I won't take from anyone — that I am dishonest and that I am a liar. I was about to assault him hip and thigh, when I realized, just in time, that all he meant was that I was a professional writer of fiction. In short, he knew who I was.

So I simply said, in the mildest possible way, "That's true, but I also write non-fiction, and I'm talking in the non-fiction mode right now."

Yet non-fiction can be more disturbing and sometimes harder to believe than fiction.

In ancient times, when people believed that Earth (and usually just the small patch of Earth with which they were familiar) was virtually all there was to the Universe,

and that the heavens were just a spangled canopy designed to light the Earth and to look pretty, there was no feeling that the Earth was in any danger from the sky.

To be sure, you could never tell what an irritable, short-tempered god might do. Thus, we read in the Bible that when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, he "rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven." (Genesis 19:24)

We don't know what that means, literally, and we don't even know if Sodom and Gomorrah ever existed, for we have found no ruins that can be identified with them. Still, is it possible that an object from heaven (a sizable meteorite) struck and destroyed them? (There is no evidence of that, either.)

Then, too, I have a pet theory of my own concerning the great flood that devastated the land of Sumeria about 2800 B.C. There was a large flood at that time, a not-uncommon thing in any river valley, but the Biblical account of its having covered the entire Earth cannot be taken literally. We must remember that, to the average Sumerian, Sumeria was the entire Earth.

The Bible says, "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life . . . were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened." (Genesis 7:11).

By the opening of the windows

of heaven, the Bible obviously means that it rained heavily. What does it mean, though, when it says that "all the fountains of the great deep" were "broken up." The "great deep" is, of course, the ocean, but how does this come into it? Consider, though, that Noah's Ark was supposed to come to rest in the mountains of Ararat (what is now Armenia), which is far to the northwest of Sumeria. The natural lie of the land slopes downward from northwest to southeast. The great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, flow southeast in precisely the opposite direction from that in which the Ark drifted. How could it drift upstream?

Suppose, though, that a meteorite of considerable size struck the waters of the Persian Gulf and set up a huge tidal wave. That would sweep up the Sumerian valley in the direction opposite to the flow of the rivers.

It would be nice if someone could find a crater in the floor of the Persian Gulf that is not quite five thousand years old, but I don't think anyone has ever looked.

Although the ancients did not record meteorites as falling upon Sodom, or upon the Persian Gulf, they knew that meteorites fell. Occasionally, one would be seen to fall, and it would seem obvious that it had been sent by the gods. It

might be a warning against sin, or a sign of approval.

In any case, such meteorites were often considered holy. The Black Stone in the Kaaba, Islam's holiest shrine, is probably a meteorite (no one is allowed to test it, of course). A stone from heaven was worshipped in connection with the mother-goddess, Artemis, at the ancient city of Ephesus. The occasional bits of nickel-iron found in the soil that were meteoric in origin were sparingly used for tools, since the metal was stronger and tougher than the usual bronze.

The trouble was that these stories of occasional falls from heaven were so interlarded with mythological interpretations that in modern times, when science began to overtake mythology, scientists were in no mood to take such tales seriously.

A German physicist, Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni (1756-1827), was an exception, however. There were peasants who claimed that they had actually seen stones falling from heaven, and although they were peasants and, therefore, by definition, moronic and superstitious, Chladni decided to keep an open mind and investigate. He travelled to the sites of reported falls and actually picked up pieces of meteorites and began a collection. In 1794, he published a book

suggesting that meteorites were the remnants of a primordial planet that had, for some reason, exploded.

In 1803, a French physicist, Jean Baptiste Biot (1774-1862), also investigated reports of falls from heaven and travelled to the sites. He produced such a comprehensive, thoroughgoing, and convincing analysis, that an increasing number of scientists came to accept the possibility of meteorites from the sky. Perhaps this was made easier by the fact that, beginning in 1801, a few small planetary bodies ("asteroids") were found in the regions between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, and astronomers first came to realize that there might indeed be cosmic debris in the sky.

We now know that the neighborhood of the Earth is dusty and gravelly and that, as our planet moves through space, it collides with something like 100 billion bits of matter every day. The vast majority of these bits are tiny dust particles that do not affect us significantly (except perhaps to serve as nuclei for raindrops, making them essential to our weather pattern). About 25 million of them a day are large enough to heat up and sparkle as meteors or "shooting stars" here and there in Earth's sky. These quickly evaporate and never reach the surface except as dust and gas.

A few, a very few of the meteors

are large enough to survive the passage through the atmosphere and to reach the Earth in the form of visible chunks, whereupon they are styled "meteorites." There are about 25 such falls each year, though only a fraction of these are actually located. About a thousand meteorites are known, although large numbers are now being found in Antarctica where, against the snow, any visible piece of non-snow that is not human-made must be a meteorite.

The largest known meteorite that has been discovered in one piece is in Namibia in southwest Africa and has an estimated weight of about 60 tons. No one has thought of trying to move it. Another meteorite, discovered by the American Arctic-explorer, Robert Edwin Peary (1856-1920), weighs 31 tons. It was moved and is on display at the American Museum of Natural History, where I have seen and touched it many times. It is the largest meteorite "in captivity."

The knowledge of the existence of meteorites, even the very occasional one that has a mass in the ton-range has never frightened humanity. One might zero in and hit me in the head and kill me instantly (they travel at 30 kilometers a second, or so), but the chance of that is infinitesimal. The dangerous meteorites are very few and Earth, as a

target, is huge.

There is no known case of any human being having been killed by a meteorite. One that fell in Egypt in 1911 is supposed to have killed a dog. In 1938, a meteorite struck a garage in Illinois and buried itself in a car inside the garage, but there was no one in the car. In 1954, a woman in Alabama is reported to have been stuck and bruised by the ricocheting fragment of a meteorite.

Is there any evidence for the existence of meteorite falls other than the experience of having some strike Earth? Indeed, yes. Long before science turned its attention to meteorites on Earth, something interesting turned up in connection with the Moon.

In 1609, the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), having built a primitive telescope for himself, turned it on the Moon. He found at once that the Moon was more than a shining plate of heavenly material designed to illuminate the night sky. He found it to be a *world*, with mountains and with flat areas he called "seas." In addition, it seemed to be littered with craters.

Craters, such as those on the Moon, can be formed in one of two ways. Either a large body falling from the sky strikes the Moon's surface (a meteoric impact) and

gouges out a crater, or the crater is the fossil remnant of an extinct volcano.

People of Earth had no experience with meteoric impacts in Galileo's time, but had lots of experience with volcanic eruptions, so it was taken for granted that the Lunar craters were of volcanic origin. To be sure, they were much larger than Earthly volcanic craters, but the Lunar surface gravity is only one-sixth that of Earth's, so that a volcanic eruption of a given force would kick up far more material. Besides, if it were a matter of meteoric impacts, the meteorites would come from all directions, and those that came in diagonally would form elliptical craters, while volcanic eruptions would form only circular craters. Since the Lunar craters were all more or less circular, that seemed to settle the matter in favor of volcanoes.

The first person to question the volcanic origin seriously was an American geologist, Grove Karl Gilbert (1845-1918). He argued, in the 1890's, that the Lunar craters were altogether different in shape from Earthly volcanic craters, and that Earthly volcanic craters were almost always on mountain peaks, whereas the Lunar craters were at ground level. He could not, however, explain why the Lunar craters, if formed by meteoric impact, were

circular rather than elliptical.

The answer to that came later and was worked out in 1929 by the American astronomer Forest Ray Moulton (1872-1952). He pointed out that meteorites hit the Moon at 30 kilometers per second or more and that the vast kinetic energy of a sizable body moving at such a speed, when suddenly converted into heat at the moment of impact, would result in a titanic explosion. It would be the explosion, not the impact, that would create the crater, and the explosion, like a volcanic eruption, would produce a circular crater.

In 1900, the American geologist Thomas Chrowder Chamberlain had advanced the "planetesimal theory" of the origin of the Solar system. He maintained that, originally, the dust and gas of the nebula out of which the Solar system was formed coagulated into relatively small bodies of planetesimals. These collided with each other, the larger ones growing at the expense of the smaller ones, until the full-sized planets were formed.

If this were true, then it became clear that when the planets were nearly formed, there would still be a number of planetesimals about and that they would form the last collisions with the growing planets, leaving craters as the marks of that final bombardment.

Chamberlain's theory is no longer accepted in the form in which he presented it, but in present-day theories of the formation of the Solar system, the planetesimals still exist, and the last ones have formed the craters we see on the Moon, for instance.

Since we have learned to send probes beyond the Earth-Moon system, we have found that the Moon is not exceptional in this respect. We have found craters on Mercury, Mars, Phobos, Deimos, Ganymede, Callisto, and on other worlds as well.

But if craters, formed by meteoric impacts, are so common in the Solar system, how did the Earth escape?

The answer is, it didn't. It received its full share.

Then why isn't the Earth covered with craters as the Moon and Mercury are? As it happens, the period of major impacts took up the first half billion years of the history of the Solar system. After that, most of the planetesimals were used up and things grew relatively quiet.

It means that the craters had four billion years in which to disappear. On the Moon, though, and on the other smaller airless worlds of the Solar system, there were no effects that sufficed to wipe out the craters. The craters on the Moon are as fresh now as they were four

billion years ago.

Not so in the case of Earth. We have an atmosphere that erodes these features, as do the beating waves, the pouring rivers, and the falling rain. And after life developed on Earth, it, too, through its activities acted to erase all signs of the craters. The craters on Earth were there in the beginning, in other words, but they are not there any more.

This history of meteoric impacts in the Solar system is not frightening in itself. After all, meteoric impacts would seem a thing of the past, something that took place in the infancy of the Solar system and takes place no longer. To be sure, there are occasional pieces that weigh up to 30 or even 60 tons and fall on Earth. These undoubtedly caused devastation in the immediate area in which they fell, but it was far from enough to imperil the planet.

When we say "planetesimals" we're talking of objects with masses not in the tens of tons, but in the millions, billions, and trillions of tons. An impact with one of those would be serious indeed, even deadly, but surely those things are all gone.

Or are they? Beginning in 1801, the asteroids were discovered. They are planetesimals, if you like, and

the largest one, Ceres, is about 950 kilometers in diameter.

As time went on, more and more asteroids were discovered, all smaller than Ceres, most much smaller. Nowadays, some 3,000 asteroids are actually known, and some astronomers suspect there may be 100,000 altogether that have diameters of a kilometer or more. Even the smallest of these would produce devastating results if it struck the Earth.

But how can they do so? All the asteroids seem safely tucked away in the asteroid belt between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter.

But are they? The smaller an asteroid is, the more easily and drastically its orbit can be changed by the gravitational pull of Jupiter and other planets. The smallest asteroids will be constantly shifting their orbits slightly. Some will be pushed farther from Earth, but some will be pushed nearer.

The first asteroid to be discovered that had an orbit that carried it closer to the Sun than Mars ever went, was Eros, in 1898. If Earth and Eros were in the proper place in their respective orbits, they would be only 14 million miles apart. That is little more than half the minimum distance of Venus from Earth, and was the closest approach of any object then known, other than the Moon.

Of course, 14 million miles is a comfortable distance, and Eros gets that close only at long intervals. Still, Eros is 20 kilometers across, and there would be no objection (except by astronomers who want to observe it for one reason or another) if it stayed still farther away.

In the last fifty years, however, many more "Earth-approaching asteroids" or "Earth-grazers" have been discovered. At present about 50 of them have been definitely seen and their orbits plotted, and many can approach Earth much more closely than Eros ever does. They are mostly only 1 or 2 kilometers across, but that is enough to do terrifying damage. Some astronomers estimate there may be 1500 such Earth-grazers with diameters of more than half a kilometer.

And sooner or later, one of these Earth-grazers is bound to make contact with us, so you see the age of planetesimals is not quite over.

But in that case, we ought to have been struck in recent geologic history.

And yes, we have. Even in the 20th Century.

On June 30, 1908, something happened in central Siberia near the Tunguska River. Exactly what happened we don't know because no one was near enough to the site

to see exactly what had happened, and if he were, he'd probably not be alive to serve as witness. The closest person was 100 kilometers away, and even at that distance, the explosion was forcible enough to knock him off his chair. It flattened every tree for miles around and wiped out a herd of reindeer.

I have often reflected on the lucky chance that such an explosion, undoubtedly a meteoric impact, took place exactly where it did. If it had landed almost anywhere else, it would have killed anywhere from thousands to millions of people in a split-second. If it had landed in the ocean, it would have set up tidal waves that would have done the same. If it had landed on an ice-cap, it might have melted large sections, with drastic results. Central Siberia was one of the very few places in which it could have landed and done no harm to anything human or human-made. (This was 1908, remember. At the present time, I doubt there is any such desolation left on Earth. Wherever the next Tunguska-type explosion takes place it will undoubtedly do damage, from the severe to the horrendous.

I have heard it said that if the Earth had been six hours later in its turning, the Tunguska object would have hit St. Petersburg, the Russian capital. Nowadays, if a meteoric

impact were to wipe out a major Soviet or American city, the victimized nation might suspect a first strike and instantly retaliate. (It doesn't bear thinking of.)

It was impossible to examine the Tunguska site for a long time. By the time Russia had organized an expedition, World War I had erupted. That, and the Russian Revolution plus the Russian Civil War, meant that it was not till 1927 that the first exploratory group approached.

It is now thought that what struck Siberia was a piece of a comet about 100 meters in diameter. It was probably mostly ice with an admixture of rock. The ice vaporized and exploded before it actually touched the surface of the Earth so that it left no crater and so that the devastation was spread over a wider area.

The Tunguska event is the worst known meteoric impact that took place while *Homo sapiens* roamed the Earth, but there were earlier impacts, too. We know of one that left behind the only object that clearly resembles a Lunar crater, although a very small one.

This crater is in Arizona. It is about 1.2 kilometers in diameter (or three-fourths of a mile) and 180 meters deep. Its rim is about 45 meters above the flatness of the desert that surrounds it.

The crater was first discovered in the 1880's, and it was taken to be an extinct volcano. G.K. Gilbert came to study it and announced that it had to be a volcano because it was circular. (It was this study that led him to consider the Lunar volcanoes, whereafter he came to the conclusion that they were caused by meteoric impacts despite their circularity.)

Nevertheless, the Arizona crater could not be dismissed so lightly. The region was rich in iron fragments, and that made it seem as though a meteorite had fallen. In 1905, an American mining engineer, Daniel Moreau Barringer (1860-1929), came to the site to try to locate the buried mass of the meteor which, as a solid lump of iron, would be enormously valuable. He failed. Perhaps it was buried too deep, or perhaps the iron had vaporized on contact, but his investigation did produce evidence that it was caused by an impact. After that, it was called "Barringer Crater."

Once Moulton had showed that impact craters would be circular regardless of the angle at which the meteor struck; all doubt was removed and it came to be called "Meteor Crater."

Meteor Crater seems to have been formed about 50,000 years ago, when Neanderthal man was the dominant form of existing hominid,

and when no hominids had yet entered the American continents. The Meteor Crater was formed without the witness of human or near-human eyes.

Meteor Crater happens to be located in a desert that has been a desert for at least the 50,000 years since it was formed. That means there has been little water there, and little in the way of life, so that it has remained largely uneroded.

Elsewhere on Earth, there are less obvious circular features, usually best visible from the air, where one can see small circular, or partly circular, lakes, or where the vegetation takes on a kind of circular character. These are "fossil craters" that were punched into existence a few million years ago and have been largely eroded away.

A really large impact seems to have taken place 65 million years ago at the end of the Cretaceous period.* A true Earth-grazer seems to have struck the Earth then, and produced drastic results in the form of volcanic eruptions, fires, tidal waves, and stratospheric dust so that three-fourths of the species of living things on Earth were wiped out, and even the quarter that survived must have been seriously

*See YES! WITH A BANG (F & SF, June, 1981)

depleted in numbers.

The large animals suffered particularly and, in the aftermath of this enormous strike, all the dinosaurs died off, for instance, after they had ruled the Earth for 150 million years. The crocodilians were the largest reptiles to survive. A horde of tiny mammals and birds survived, also.

Apparently, this was not an isolated event. Throughout evolutionary history there have been periods of "Great Dyings" in which vast numbers of living species suddenly disappeared. At least one such event was even worse than the Cretaceous. At the end of the Permian era, some 90 percent of all the species then extant were wiped out. It may be that all such periods were caused by meteoric impacts.

No meteoric impact has been severe enough to sterilize the Earth altogether and force life to start all over (if it could), but who knows what the next one will bring.

There are those who maintain that such meteoric impacts are an essential part of the evolutionary process. After a period of time, life on Earth gets too well-adapted to its environment and evolution starts heading for a dead end.

Comes a catastrophe and we start over. The species that are left alive, usually small ones, suddenly find that their predators are gone

and that whole environment niches have been left empty. There is then a rapid evolutionary radiation, and all sorts of experimental forms are worked out that might never have been elaborated under the previous dispensation.

Thus, mammals and birds both grew large and, sometimes, fierce so that we had the baluchitherium, and sabre-tooth smilodon, the elephant-bird of Madagascar, and the giant moas of New Zealand. These were filling the dinosaurian niches and were not very successful.

The mammals had a chance, though, to experiment in a new direction, one that the dinosaurs in their time had never ventured into, and that was in the development of bigger and better brains. The primates, in particular, were successful at this, specializing in eyes, brains, and hands, and the result was, eventually, whether for better or for worse, the development of humanity and the first technological civilization the Earth had ever seen.

That's all very well, when we profit, but what if another impact comes in the future, wipes us out and gives some other small unregarded species the chance to radiate in all directions and to produce something that is not necessarily better or worse, but is distinctly and startlingly different from us.

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The new dominant species would think this was great, but somehow I don't think we could work up any enthusiasm for such a change.

As early as 1959, then, I suggested that, once humanity gained the ability to do so, a Space Patrol ought to be established, similar to the Ice Patrol that reports on icebergs in the North Atlantic. If ever an Earth-grazer is noted whose orbit seems dangerous, it could be struck by one or more hydrogen bombs (or some more advanced device) that would convert it into rubble.

Of course, the rubble would continue to orbit the Sun, but if it ever approached the Earth thereafter, it would have spread out so that relatively few pieces would strike and those would do so at far-separated points. Then, too, most of them would be so small that they would do no damage of importance.

Since the meteoric impact that ended the Cretaceous was first advanced in 1981, some scientists have begun suggesting a Space Patrol in all seriousness, but no one has yet happened to notice that I was the first to do so.

Since his last story appeared here, Michael Cassutt has been writing for television: *The Twilight Zone*, *Max Headroom* and others. The superior story below will appear in an anthology of SF and fantasy with Catholic themes edited by Mr. Cassutt, Andrew Greeley and Martin Harry Greenberg titled *SACRED VISIONS* and scheduled for publication late this year.

Curious Elation

By Michael Cassutt

IT WAS A back-page item in the *Courier-Citizen*, the hometown newspaper I still receive. Doc Hustad was retiring, and they held a banquet for him at the Buena Vista Inn. The mayor was there, and the superintendent of schools, and the other two GPs who, with Hustad, had provided the town with medical care for most of two decades.

Also present were Millie (Mrs. Dr.) Hustad; their oldest son, Keith, now an attorney resident in Milwaukee; son David, a local businessman (This was a journalistic kindness: David Hustad, the doctor's son, actually worked on the assembly line at the paper bag factory. How he managed to marry Leslie Keilan, I'll never know.); and son Gary, of course, "who lives at home."

Who lives at home.

It was an unscheduled trip. I had had a court date in Chicago on Monday. But during a plane change in Denver, I got to brooding about Gary Hustad, and about a question my son had asked me the night be-

fore. Within the hour a sudden winter storm ascended out of Lake Michigan, canceling all flights to Chicago and points east. Then a phone call to my office told me the hearing had been postponed until after the holidays. I was less surprised by this than you'd believe.

And soon enough the flight that had been designed to deposit me in Chicago delivered me to Minneapolis at six in the morning. Three hours later, under the glare of the town's silver water tower, I crossed the river into Buena Vista.

It was a Friday, a workday, and I poked through what passed for rush hour on Main Street, noting the changes, feeling at home in spite of the fact that I had left for good fifteen years earlier. Here was Lark's Bar, where I celebrated my high school graduation by downing a pitcher of Bud and puking it all over the backseat of Randy Boucher's Tempest. Here was the Elk's Club, where Wednesday-night summer dances introduced me to Minnesota girls whose willingness to French-kiss was directly proportional to their consumption of Schlitz Malt Liquor. Here was the old high school, where I had been voted Most Likely to Become a Vicious Corporate Lawyer. These places held no attraction for me now, but they'd done their job well: I had a moderate cocaine habit, a wife and a mistress, and a Candotti briefcase full of legal papers. All I lacked was a reason for being there.

I certainly couldn't go home; my parents, uninformed of my presence in town, would be (a) not at home and (b) too full of unpleasant questions. It was too cold to hang out on a street corner, and the wind whipping off the river, threatening more snow, made me dismiss any vague thoughts I may have had of driving around the countryside. So I simply drove down Main Street, turning right on Hudson and passing a forlorn-looking St. Nicholas's Catholic Church. The *Courier-Citizen* had said that the old church was to be torn down in favor of a new one by the freeway.

Staying on Hudson, I passed through the old part of town, reaching the intersection of Hudson and Ninth, then turned up Ninth to Hill, and discovered that, without thinking, I was retracing the same route by which for eight years I had walked home from school. When I got to where Ninth crossed Hill, I pulled over and parked.

The sun was as high as it ever gets in this latitude, in this season, and still it barely cleared the hill. I rolled down the window and smelled the snow in the air.

I tapped out a little snow of my own. And suddenly knew why I was there.

When I got out, I ruined my California shoes in the salt that was spread on the street. For good measure, I soaked my feet stepping through a ridge of plowed snow that bordered the relatively clean sidewalk. Stomping my feet in futility, I started walking up the hill.

Two stories high, sprawling, equipped with an enclosed pool, and solidly built in the fashion of the McCarthy years, the Hustad place was still one of the nicest in nice Buena Vista — in spite of twenty years of expensive developments beyond the hill. It had a formerly commanding view of the city as well, now obscured — purposely? — by a stand of pines. I passed the smaller, prefab house of David and Leslie Hustad, built on land given to them, of course, by Doc. For a moment I entertained the fantasy that I would suddenly encounter Leslie. A wicked scenario it was: the disappointing, now-heavyset husband off at work in an appliance factory . . . troublesome children away at school . . . lovely Leslie still slim and, if anything, more attractive at thirty than she'd been at seventeen. She would be easy for me this time. But though smoke curled from the chimney, the lesser Hustad house seemed deserted. Winter here is like that. I had yet to see a person on the street, and only two cars had driven by.

Distractions. I found the driveway to Buddy's house and followed it in.

I hesitated in those last few steps. I hadn't called or written or, for that matter, even talked to a member of the Hustad family since running into Leslie at the supermarket three years back. And the idea that small towns are somehow especially forgiving when it comes to prodigals is a myth: these people have been known to hold grudges for thirty years.

The walk was neatly shoveled, as the driveway had been. The big three-car garage stood open, a grey Chevy van its only occupant. Suppose they had gone out? Suppose no one was at home?

It was a silly thought. Gary was *always* at home.

I rang the doorbell. In complete contrast to every other house I'd lived in or visited during my twelve years in Buena Vista, the doorbell at the Hustad home actually worked. But apart from the muted chime, my ringing it seemed to have no effect.

For about five seconds, I considered walking away. Compulsions, though, must be given more than five seconds of time and a single stab at a doorbell. I rang again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" a woman's voice answered almost immediately. I heard the inner door open, noted the sound of firm footsteps, witnessed a tug at the outer door.

"Yes?" Mrs. Hustad, radiant in slacks and an L.L. Bean sweater.

Before I could answer, she raised a finger as a prop to memory. "Jeff Kramer!"

"Mrs. Hustad."

"Well, well. Didn't I see your picture in the paper a little while back?" That "little while" had been more like two years, some mention of a notorious lawsuit in which I'd been involved. The article had used my father as a well-meaning but highly inaccurate source.

"You know how it is — everyone gets his picture in the *Courier* if he lives long enough."

She laughed. She was a very pretty woman, even at sixty. "What on earth are you doing here?" Then she thought for a moment. "You were in Gary's class."

"Yeah. I was just in town . . . and I saw the piece about Doc . . . and I haven't seen Gary in such a long time that I thought. . . ." I was babbling.

"Come in," she said. "You must be freezing out there." And over her shoulder called, "Gary!"

I followed her through a living room that had a cozy warmth that came from use. There was a Barcalounger for Doc, a couch for the Mrs. A TV zapper rested on the coffee table amid a jumble of *Ladies' Home Journals*, *National Geographics*, *Fortunes*. Bookshelves held the complete — or so it seemed — *Reader's Digest Condensed Novels*, a pair of early Ludlums, and the newest Judith Krantz. And, on one shelf, strangely, C. S. Lewis, Evelyn Waugh, Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton. On the dark, paneled walls were photos of the family. Including Gary.

"Wait here, please," Mrs. Hustad said. "Gary! You have company!" The surprise in her voice made it clear that it was not a phrase she often used. I heard her running up the stairs.

Then the thumping started . . . the footsteps of Frankenstein's monster.

The last time I saw Gary Hustad was half a lifetime ago, back in the days when the Hustads still attended 8:30 Mass, and the Kramers ten o'clock. (Thanks to the tendency of Catholic families to settle on a particular service, attending no other, we had not spoken more than a few words in two or three years even then.) It must have been spring, during

one of those horribly long Passion feasts read by the equally horrible Father Bob (who insisted on reading *every* response and singing *every* verse) that ran so late it caused the exiting attendees of 8:30 to collide with the arrivals for ten. I was waiting in the back, when I saw Gary painfully draw himself out of the pew and move down the aisle, bracing himself with a hand against the wall, that shortened leg making that Long John Silver — or Frankenstein — thump.

The door opened now, and there he was: pale, very thin, balding after the unfortunate fashion of the Hustads. Gary looked an unhealthy fifty. "Hello," he said.

"Hi, Gary. I don't know if you remember me —"

"Come on, Kramer! Of course I remember you!" Annoyance is an under-rated fountain of youth. In the space of a sentence, he dropped twenty years. "What do you want?"

"Gary, really!" said Mrs. Hustad, to both of us. "It isn't as though we have visitors every day."

His knuckles tightened on the cane, and for a moment I was afraid that he would throw it at me. But he used it only to point to the couch. "Go on. Sit down."

"Why don't I get some tea," Mrs. Hustad said, omitting the question mark and leaving us alone.

"You're living in California," Gary said finally, "with all those earthquakes."

"We get them from time to time. No big ones yet, God willing." (When had I started to use *that* phrase?)

"I saw something in the paper . . . you won a lawsuit against the guy that bombed that abortion clinic." So his world did exist beyond the front door. Most of my old high school chums were only vaguely aware that I had left town.

"Yeah," I said, suddenly uncomfortable. "I guess for a lawyer there's no such thing as bad publicity."

"I guess." He did not look at me. He seemed to be contained totally within himself . . . so much so that I began to wonder if his eyes had also failed . . . until he cleared his throat and said, with a smile, "What would Sister Clarentine say if she knew you were defending abortionists?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, forgive him!" I did a creditable imitation of the old crone, and managed to get a toothy smile out of Gary. It was

so quiet you could hear snowflakes hitting the roof. "So . . . how are you doing?"

"I'm still here."

I cleared my throat. What was taking Mrs. Hustad so long with the goddamned tea? "Do you think about it much?"

"Think about what?"

"About the accident."

"What accident?"

"On the playground —" I stopped. Clearly this was the wrong approach. Just as clearly, there was no right approach. "I remember there was an accident," I said, giving him every opportunity to nod yes, "on the playground at St. Nicholas's," hearing my own words leaking into the room, "and you got hurt."

Mrs. Hustad, with exquisite timing, chose that moment to bring us our tea. "Mom," Gary said, as Mrs. Hustad handed me my cup, "do you remember anything about some accident I had?" Without waiting for an answer, Gary said to me: "That, I guess, made me a cripple?"

She was shaking her head and trying hard not to look at me. "Even if there had been, I don't see what good there is in talking about it like this."

"I'm sorry," I said. "That isn't what I came to talk about." Unfortunately, it was *exactly* what I had come to talk about. "I really just wanted to say hello."

"Yeah," Gary said. "Hello." And he got up. As did I.

"I guess I'd better be going."

GARY AND I first met when we were both eight years old. This was right around the time of Vatican II. We were the last class of altar boys at St. Nicholas's to undergo the agonies of learning the Latin Mass — and the first to discard it. All our clever mnemonics — *tantrum therego* for *tantum ergo*, *curious elation* for the *Kyrie Eleison* — went to waste.

It should be noted that giving up the Latin Mass was St. Nicholas's only notable concession to the liberalization of the Catholic Church. This was, after all, Joe McCarthy's Wisconsin. The fact that the good senator had faded from the national scene ten years earlier meant nothing: there would be no slackening in our vigilance against sex education in the schools, or fluoride in the water, or the terrible Madalyn Murray O'Hair,

He landed on his back with such a dull slap that I thought he had been killed.

or any other manifestations of Satan, hereafter known by his twentieth-century name, International Communism. Priests had been tortured in China. Churches in Russia had been turned into stables. A day did not go by that we didn't hear about Red atrocities in Southeast Asia. We lived with the constant belief that Soviet nuclear missiles were poised to destroy Minneapolis, dooming the rural survivors to a life of atheistic slavery and sin. Loyalty and cunning were the sword and shield of the Righteous, and we were the most loyal and cunning, Gary and I. The doctor's son and the lawyer's boy. "A" students, altar boys. Future priests who would be strong under torture. And, of course, best friends.

It happened one day in March at St. Nicholas's. We were on the playground for the endless noon recess. The asphalt yard was a checkerboard of grade-specific turf whose borders were as finely determined and fiercely defended as those of turn-of-the-century Balkan Europe. We future eighth graders clung to our second-tier sector with the swing set and the ivy-covered fence, and eyed the occupied lands, which included the kickball diamond, with the cool certainty that we would, in time, inherit them, becoming masters of the entire world.

We were goofing around on the swing set, one of those huge gray metal jobs whose legs were sunk in concrete, and which had a tall slide bolted to one side. Ideally, this piece of playware should have belonged to fourth or fifth graders, but they had been banished to the far end of the yard (where they tormented those even younger), and we amused ourselves between touch football and dodgeball by performing aerobatic maneuvers with the swings . . . leaping off the top of the slide, for example, into a sweeping corkscrew turn . . . climbing to the top of the swing set itself, no small accomplishment, clutching a leather swing, finally leaping away into space, where an unforgettable ride awaited.

Gary went up the stairs of the slide, and Russell Jensen fed him the swing. I was right behind him. It was just an ordinary moment — a few seconds. As Gary reached for the swing, I nudged him. I *shoved* him. Immediately knowing I'd gone too far, not sure why I had done it.

He missed the swing. He reached for the grips on the slide and missed

them. And he toppled straight down to the ground.

He landed on his back with such a dull slap that I thought he had been killed. I expected to see blood beneath his head . . . but he got up! Clearly hurting, tears brimming in his eyes, he got up. "Oh man." That was all he said, looking at me. By then Sister Mary Lawrence was running toward him, and she took him off to his father's clinic.

I decided to spare my parents a surprise visit, and checked into the Motel Six near the freeway. Buena Vista's population had swelled to six thousand, but of that number, I knew — well — probably less than a hundred. None of them, I was sure, would be caught within a mile of the Motel Six.

Once in the room, I immediately took to the telephone and called Diane. "Where are you?" she said.

I could have lied and said Chicago, but had she wanted, she could have easily checked it. Had she cared. "Buena Vista," I said.

"What happened to Chicago?" She had been one of those sweet-tongued Minnesota girls, so she knew the place. I told her about the weather diversion and the cancellation. "Oh. How are your parents?"

"I haven't see them yet."

"Where are you?"

"In the motel."

"Jeff . . . is everything all right?"

Things had not been all right for some time, as we both knew. "Yeah. The weather's lousy. How's Noah?"

"Fine. He's in the backyard. Should I get him?"

"Let him play." He might have other disturbing questions to ask. I was having a tough enough time dealing with the first one. "I'll call you later, O.K.?"

"O.K."

"Love me?"

"Love you."

She hung up. I pictured her turning toward the sunlight two thousand miles away, a frown on her face.

It was perhaps one in the afternoon, central standard time, and already growing dark outside. I realized I had had perhaps two hours of sleep in the past thirty, and went to bed.

* * *

In fact, we had never been good friends. To begin with, Gary was from one of the old Buena Vista families; my people, by comparison, were fresh off the boat. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. When they selected the members of the school patrol, Gary got to be captain. (In spite of the fact that I was his equal academically — the purported criterion for making the squad was good grades — I wasn't even chosen.) When they wanted some presentable boy to read aloud at the school Christmas pageant, they picked Gary. I was the alternate. If there was a plum to be had, Gary had it. And I was automatically second choice.

I knew even then that hurt feelings on my part would strike most people as completely unjustified — after all, there were other boys and girls who would have loved just being second choice. And I knew that. But according to my reading of life's rules — the Gospel according to St. Nicholas — I should have been getting some of those goodies. I *expected* them where these other boys and girls did not, thus my anger. Thus my growing hatred of Gary Hustad.

My response to the perceived unfairness of the game was to change the rules myself. While maintaining my straight-A grades and general classroom deportment, I began to debase the spirit of the rules. I began to swear. I became known for my sarcasm, for challenging the nuns on their facts, though politely, politely. I smoked a cigarette and looked at a *Playboy* centerfold with Eric Thorson — the seventh-grade branch representative of the Prince of Darkness, according to Sister Clarentine — and refused to deny it once word got around. And I never passed up a chance to dump on Gary.

And do you know? It worked like *magic*. I got chosen to go up against the fearsome public school kids in the Buena Vista city spelling bee. I began to give the morning announcements over the school p.a. system. I became the eighth-grade captain of the school patrol . . . all by making it clear that, you know, I could really live without it.

Best of all, my sudden ascent was matched by the mysterious decline of Gary Hustad. He had returned to school just a few days after his accident. The damage was a concussion and some bruises — lucky he didn't break something.

But in early May, a month later, he began to miss class. I didn't worry about the absences; I gloried in them, since, without Gary around, I was

the undisputed champion "good kid" of the whole school. And as the days grew longer and warmer, and summer's freedom approached, none of us made anything of Mrs. Hustad's appearances at morning Mass . . . nor of her hushed conversations with Sister Clarentine as Gary's schoolbooks were taken from his desk.

Gary missed his year-end tests. It was in June, a month after school got out, that I overheard my mother tell my father about the terrible thing that was happening to Gary Hustad . . . cancer of the spine.

When I awoke, it was Saturday afternoon. I was starving, so I got dressed and went across the street to the new Denny's — new to me, meaning it hadn't existed fifteen years ago. When I returned to the room, I called Diane again. "I was worried about you," she said.

"I've been sleeping for the past twenty hours."

"That sounds healthy."

"I needed it."

"Have you talked to your parents?"

"No," I said. Sensing the beginning of a difficult conversation, I added, "But I will, tonight."

"What will you tell them?"

"Some lie."

"Stick with what you're good at." When I let that pass, she said, "Are you coming home?"

"Monday."

"This is very weird, Jeff. Is there something wrong?"

"I don't think so," I said, telling the truth for the first time in years. "I'll know in a day or two. Still love me?"

"Love you."

One of the more peculiar modifications of Catholic worship to come out of the sixties — worse than the guitar Mass, even — was the creation of Saturday-evening services that would "count" as Sunday church. In high school and college, I thought this was the neatest invention since the portable hair dryer, since it allowed you to head off for an evening of debauchery with a feeling of relief that you'd gotten the obligation out of the way . . . knowing that you didn't have to get up on Sunday morning.

I had no plans for the evening. I had no plans at all. But I wanted to go to Saturday-night Mass.

(My family had taken to this innovation, too, at least during the summer months. But it was a cold December Saturday — what I used to call headache weather — and my parents were sure to have fallen back on their old habit of ten o'clock Sunday church and breakfast out. I wasn't likely to see them at St. Nicholas's.)

By five o'clock, it had been dark for an hour. I took a place in the back, jammed in against some sturdy couple I vaguely recognized. The service was unremarkable, serving only to remind me of the more suffocating Father Bob specials of my youth. We students of St. Nicholas's attended Mass daily, and the brief sermons we had were tailored for us. Lots of martyrs, lots of upside down crucifixions, usually in resistance to sins of impurity. All I had ever really learned from these stories was that to your serious Catholic, a story in which everyone dies is considered to have a happy ending.

After the "Go in peace" and the final rendition of "Kumbaya," I drifted out with the crowd, which seemed to evaporate in the night air. Maybe I was searching for someone familiar, I don't know. But I hung around long enough to notice that the Hustad's gray van was parked in the handicap zone . . . and that someone was helping Gary, in his wheelchair, out the side door of the church.

I rushed over. "Let me."

I had been afraid that it would be Doc or, worse yet, his brother David holding the door, but it was just a stranger. "Got it?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, though Gary looked at me with suspicion. When his samaritan was gone, I asked, "All alone?"

"I can drive." He began to wheel himself toward the van. I fumbled for the lock on the side door as Gary expertly bumped off the curb and around to the back ramp. He opened the door, then tossed a switch that raised him and the chair to the point where he could enter the van. Then he said, "If you really want to do something, fold up the chair."

It took me ten minutes, while he laboriously pulled himself toward his specially modified driver's seat. Finally I got it stowed for him, slammed the door, and went around front.

He hadn't started the engine.

"What are you doing?"

"Just trying to help."

"With me."

"I don't know. I guess I wanted to talk."

He started to say something, thought about it, then started again. "What are you gonna say? And why now?" He hesitated again. "We were twelve years old!"

"I came to apologize."

"You're not going to have the poor taste to apologize for the fact that you are healthy and successful while I'm a pitiful cripple —"

"No," I said, "I want you to forgive me for *making* you a cripple."

Then he did start the engine. "I don't have to listen to this. You're crazy."

"I did it, Gary." I nodded toward the school and the playground across the street. "I pushed you off the slide —"

"So what! So —" Suddenly he let out a scream of utter frustration. He yanked the key out of the ignition and turned to me. "Get in."

I did. We sat there in damp, chilly silence.

"So you pushed me," he said. "I knew that. I also know that that had nothing to do with what happened to me."

"But I wanted you to fall. I wanted you to be sick. I wanted you dead."

The look on his face was familiar; it's the one I wear in airports to keep away the Moonies. "This is stupid. You come all this way after all this time . . . just to make me hear your confession." He struggled to put the car in gear. "Why don't you talk to a priest?"

"I don't talk to priests anymore."

"Maybe you should start!"

His shout startled both of us into silence. I realized how confusing this was for him. It was pretty confusing for me. "Gary, I'm sorry."

He shut off the engine. "Jeff, something's wrong with you."

"Yeah."

God bless him, he was actually trying to help. "Money?"

"No."

"Drugs."

"No." No problem, I mean. I've quit several times.

"What, then?"

"I have a son named Noah. He's five years old. Last week I was putting him to bed and we were having a conversation, and he asked me a question. And I didn't know the answer."

"There must be lots of questions kids ask —"

"He asked me, 'Daddy . . . who's God?' And I didn't know what to tell him."

For a long time — or so it seemed — Gary didn't answer. All around us, Buena Vista was preparing for a winter Saturday. It would snow soon. "God is life," he said finally. "He's your life and Noah's life and my life and the life of that tree and the life of the sun. If you can accept that, if you can believe that, everything is . . . easier." He cleared his throat. "Jeff, would you trade places with me? Don't answer: you wouldn't. You look at me and think, Jesus, here's a guy who's thirty-two years old and has never kissed a girl or hit a home run. I haven't been out of Buena Vista since I was thirteen, and then it was just to visit a hospital in St. Paul. I probably won't be alive ten years from now. Sometimes it's more than I can stand.

"But I don't know any other life. Nobody does. Maybe it would have been worse if I'd gotten sick when I was twenty . . . but I was a kid. I used to play in the backyard. I used to ride a bike. I guess. It's hard to remember.

"It's like I've always been this way. But I know that I won't be this way forever. Someday I won't be able to get out of bed. And after that I'll simply stop. My eyes will close. I'll go to sleep.

"But I won't be alone. I never am, because even in the middle of winter, I'm surrounded by God. He's the wind; He's the snow; He's the house. He's the pain I feel every time I want to move.

"Someday I'll sleep. But I'll bet you I have beautiful dreams."

His face was shining, and not with tears. He looked as though he felt a peace I will never know. "Are you gonna be O.K.?" he asked.

"I think so, yeah."

"Tell Noah that when he feels good, when he feels love, that's God." And then he drove away.

I WALKED ALL the way up Ninth Street, past the Hustad house, to the neighborhood where my parents lived. It was dark, and the lights were on. Although I could simply have walked up to the door and gone inside, I tried to imagine what they would be doing: dinner, certainly, Dad watching the hockey game, and Mother reading or talking on the phone. I wondered if Diane had called them and told them I was skulking around town. Maybe they were peering out from behind the curtains, wondering if that vaguely humanoid shape in the trees was their son.

And what a son. On the surface, I was not a bad man. I had always had a job. I had never been arrested. I was a successful lawyer and husband and father. But I was also the kind of person who not only got his wife pregnant, but his girlfriend, too. And coolly paid for the girlfriend's abortion, then went back to bouncing his infant son on his knee. And felt nothing. *Nothing*. At times I felt like a shell in the shape of a human being. Cut me, and I wouldn't bleed; I'd implode.

But suddenly, like a fog rolling in, it began to feel remote. College, the firm, Diane, Noah, the girlfriend. My old home was in sight — yet I couldn't seem to reach it. I started to run, and stumbled in the darkness, scraping my hands and face and tearing a hole in the knee of my pants, something I hadn't done since the playground at St. Nicholas's.

I retreated down the hill and back toward the church. The car was there; I'd half-expected it to have vanished. When I got back to the motel, I called home. There was no machine, no answer, just ringing.

But my knee was bleeding. Thank God for that.

The next morning — Sunday — I checked out, paying cash. I was amused to see that two days in a Buena Vista motel still cost less than some lunches

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I've had. The clerk was no doubt amused that I was wearing torn pants.

By the time I reached the church, ten o'clock Mass was in progress. My parents were there: I found my father's car parked in its usual place. But I didn't go inside. After all, I had met my obligation the night before. So I walked across the street to the school. The playground was fenced, but not locked. I opened the gate and went in.

And there was Gary, bundled against the cold, cane in hand, sitting on the steps of the slide. I could see that he had parked his van around the back. "Aren't you surprised to see me here?" he said.

"No," I said. "I wanted you to come."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What I wanted to tell you — what I wanted to confess to you, was that my dreams come true."

"Here we go again —"

"You're here, aren't you?" He had no answer. "When I was in college," I said, "I wanted my best friend's girlfriend. Wanted her with a passion. He got drafted. The draft was supposed to be over, and he got drafted. And I married the girl."

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I was circling. The swing set had been painted and repainted, and the pressure of thousands of children's steps had bowed the rungs, but it was still the same. "I wanted to become a lawyer, but I wasn't working hard enough. I took the exams for law school and just missed . . . then one of the guys above me came down with mono and had to drop out, so I got in."

I think he was afraid of me. Well, I would have been, too. "Whenever I wanted to screw one of my secretaries at home, my wife would get called out of town. When I wanted money — I'm not talking about needing it, but wanting it — it would show up." I was standing in front of him now. "It will be fine," I said gently, lifting him. He seemed to weigh less than Noah.

We climbed up the rungs, Gary and I. He didn't struggle, but rather, beheld the playground, the school, the spire of St. Nicholas's, as I swung him around.

Maybe it was magic or maybe luck. Maybe it was the power of prayer. Maybe I was just, as Gary said, crazy. But the evidence was everywhere, in every moment of my life — at least, from the moment Gary got hurt.

I closed my eyes and held my breath and, hugging Gary to me, fell backward off the slide.

I landed on him and knocked the air out of him. Neither of us moved for a moment. Then he rolled me off and stood up. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Give me my cane." I used it to pull myself up to the steps of the slide.

"I should call somebody."

"You should get on a plane and go back to California," I said. "Go home."

"What happened?"

"I think I just made a confession."

He backed away, unsteady, but with growing enthusiasm. At the street he paused and waved. I waved back. He tossed the car keys in his hand, testing the heft, then walked away.

Jeff, would you trade places with me?

I rested there on the steps, wondering when I would begin to feel the pain, the rage at the unfairness of it all, the fear of the terrors that await, yet knowing that this was what I needed. And that Gary was what Diane and Noah needed. As the sky grew dark and the first flakes of a gentle snow began to fall, I found myself far from anger, nowhere near despair, in fact, but filled with a curious elation.

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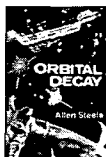
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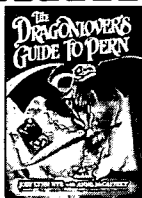
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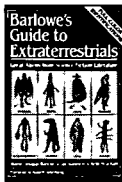
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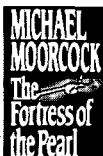


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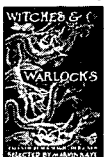
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